

The Family

*By Elder Henry B. Eyring
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles*

The family unit is fundamental not only to society and to the Church but to our hope for eternal life.

Henry B. Eyring, "The Family," Ensign, Feb. 1998, 10

Since the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ through the Prophet Joseph Smith, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has issued a proclamation only four times.¹ It had been more than 15 years since the previous one, which described the progress the Church had made in 150 years of its history. Thus, we can understand the importance our Heavenly Father places upon the family, the subject of the fifth and most recent proclamation, given on 23 September 1995.²

Because our Father loves his children, he will not leave us to guess about what matters most in this life concerning where our attention could bring happiness or our indifference could bring sadness.

Sometimes he will tell a person such things directly, by inspiration. But he will, in addition, tell us these important matters through his servants. In the words of the prophet Amos, recorded long ago, "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets" (**Amos 3:7**). He does this so that even those who cannot feel inspiration can know, if they will only listen, that they have been told the truth and been warned.

The title of the proclamation on the family reads: "The Family: A Proclamation to the World—The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

Three things about the title are worth our careful reflection. First, the subject: the family. Second, the audience, which is the whole world. And third, those proclaiming it are those we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators. All this means that the family must be of tremendous importance to us, that whatever the proclamation says could help anyone in the world, and that the proclamation fits the Lord's promise when he said, "Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same" (**D&C 1:38**).

Before we examine the words of the proclamation, let us note that the proclamation's title tells us something about how to prepare for the words that follow. We can expect that God won't just tell us a few interesting things about the family; he will tell us what a family ought to be and why. Further, we know that our Heavenly Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, want us to become like them so that we can dwell with them forever in families. We know that from this simple statement of their intent: "This is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (**Moses 1:39**).

Eternal Life: A Destination within Reach

Eternal life means to become like the Father and to live in families in happiness and joy forever, so of course we know that what he wants for us will require help beyond our powers. And if we have feelings of inadequacy, they can make it easier for us to repent and to be ready to rely on the Lord's help. The fact that the proclamation is applicable to all the world—applicable to every person and government in it—gives us assurance that we need not be overwhelmed with our feelings of inadequacy. Whoever we are, however difficult our circumstances, we can know that what our Father requires of us if we are to qualify for the blessings of eternal life will not be beyond our ability. What a young boy said long ago when he faced a seemingly impossible assignment is true: "I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them" (**1 Ne. 3:7**).

We may have to pray with faith to know what we are to do, and after obtaining such knowledge we must pray with a determination to obey. But we can know what to do and be sure that the way has been prepared for us by the Lord. As we read what the proclamation tells us about the family, we can expect—in fact, we must expect—impressions to come to our minds as to what we are to do. And we can be confident it is possible for us to do according to those impressions.

The proclamation begins this way:

"We, the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, solemnly proclaim that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children."

Let us try to imagine ourselves as little children hearing those words for the first time and believing they are true. This can be a useful attitude whenever we read or hear the word of God, because he has told us, "Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein" (**Luke 18:17**).

A little child would feel safe hearing the words "marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God." The child would know that the longing to have the love of both a father and a mother, distinct but somehow perfectly complementary, exists because such longing is part of the eternal pattern, the pattern of happiness. The child would also feel safer knowing that God will help the mother and father resolve differences and love each other, if only they would ask for his help and try. Prayers of children across the earth would go up to God, pleading for his help for parents and for families.

Now read in that same way, as if we were little children, the next words of the proclamation:

"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. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.

"In the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshiped God as their Eternal Father and accepted His plan by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize his or her divine destiny as an heir of eternal life. 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."

Understanding these truths ought to make it easier for us to feel like a little child, not just as we read the proclamation but throughout our lives, because we *are* children—but in what a family and of what parents! We can picture ourselves as we were, for longer than we can imagine, sons and daughters associating in our heavenly home with Parents who knew and loved us. Also, we know that in the premortal world we were men or women with unique gifts because of our gender and that the opportunity to be married and to become one was necessary for us to have eternal happiness. But now that we are here we can picture ourselves home again with our Heavenly Parents in that wonderful place, not only as sons and daughters but as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, grandsons and granddaughters, bound together forever in loving families.

With that picture before us we can never be tempted to think, "Maybe I wouldn't like eternal life. Maybe I would be just as happy in some other place in the life after death, for haven't I heard that even the lowest kingdoms are supposed to be more beautiful than anything we have here on earth?"

To counter such attitudes, we must have the goal of eternal life not just in our minds but in our hearts. What we want is eternal life in families. We don't just want it if that is what happens to work out, nor do we want something that might seem to be only approaching eternal life. We want eternal life, whatever its cost in effort, pain, and sacrifice. Thus, whenever we are tempted to make eternal life our hope instead of our determination, we might think of a building I saw recently.

I was in Boston, Massachusetts. For a little nostalgia, I walked up to the front of the boardinghouse I was living in when I met Kathleen, who is now my wife. That was a long time ago, so I expected to find the house in a dilapidated condition. But to my surprise, it was freshly painted and much renovated. I recalled the wonderful deal the owners gave their student renters. I had my own large room and bath, furniture and sheets provided, maid service, six big breakfasts and five wonderful dinners a week, all for the price of \$21 a week. More than that, the meals were ample and prepared with such skill that, with some affection, we called our landlady "Ma Soper." I now realize that I didn't thank Mrs. Soper often enough, nor Mr. Soper and their daughter, since it must have been some burden to have 12 single men to dinner every weeknight.

Now, this old boardinghouse could have the most spacious rooms, the best service, and the finest boarders, but we wouldn't want to live there for more than a short while. It could be beautiful beyond our

power to imagine, but still we wouldn't want to live there forever, single, if we have even the dimmest memory or the faintest vision of a family with beloved parents and children like the one from which we came to this earth and the one which is our destiny to form and to live in forever. There is only one place in heaven where there will be families—the highest degree of the celestial kingdom. That is where we will want to be.

A child hearing and believing the words of the proclamation regarding families united eternally would begin a lifetime of looking for a holy temple where ordinances and covenants perpetuate family relationships beyond the grave. The child also would begin striving to become worthy and preparing in other ways to attract a potential mate who also has become worthy of such ordinances. The words of the proclamation make it clear that to receive those blessings requires some sort of perfecting experiences. A child might not sense at first, but soon would learn, that making resolutions and trying harder can produce only faltering progress toward perfection. Additional help is needed.

Further, with age will come temptations to do things that create feelings of guilt. Every child will someday feel those pangs of conscience, as we all have. And those who feel that priceless sense of guilt and cannot shake it may despair, sensing that eternal life requires a progress toward perfection that seems increasingly beyond them. So you and I must resolve to always speak to people who don't yet know what we know about how perfection is produced. We will do that because we know that someday they will want what we want and will then realize that we were their brother or sister and that we knew the way to eternal life. It isn't hard to be a member missionary if you think of that future moment when they and we will see things as they really are.

The Sanctity of Human Life

Some other words in the proclamation will have special meaning for us, knowing what we know about eternal life. They are in the next two paragraphs:

“The first commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve pertained to their potential for parenthood as husband and wife. We declare that God's commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force. We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.

“We declare the means by which mortal life is created to be divinely appointed. We affirm the sanctity of life and of its importance in God's eternal plan.”

Believing those words, a child could spot easily the mistakes in reasoning made by some adults. For instance, apparently wise and powerful people blame poverty and famine on there being too many people in some parts of the earth or in all the earth. With great passion they argue for limiting births, as if that would produce human happiness. A child believing the proclamation will know that cannot be so, even before hearing these words from the Lord through his prophet Joseph Smith:

“For the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare; yea, I prepared all things, and have given unto the children of men to be agents unto themselves” (**D&C 104:17**).

A child could see that Heavenly Father would not command men and women to marry and to multiply and replenish the earth if the children they invited into mortality would deplete the earth. Since there is enough and to spare, the enemy of human happiness as well as the cause of poverty and starvation is not the birth of children.

It is the failure of people to do with the earth what God could teach them to do if only they would ask and then obey, for they are agents unto themselves.

We would also see that the commandment to be chaste, to employ the powers of procreation only as husband and wife, is not limiting but, rather, expanding and exalting. Children are the inheritance of the Lord to us in this life and also in eternity. Eternal life is not only to have forever our descendants from this life. It is also to have eternal increase. This is the description of what awaits those of us married as husband and wife in the temple by a servant of God with authority to offer us the sacred sealing ordinances. Here are the words of the Lord:

“It shall be done unto them in all things whatsoever my servant hath put upon them, in time, and through all eternity; and shall be of full force when they are out of the world; and they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon their heads, which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever.

“Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting” (**D&C 132:19-20**).

Now you can see why our Father in Heaven puts such a high standard before us in using procreative powers, whose continuation is at the heart of eternal life. The Lord Jesus Christ has told us what eternal life is worth: “If you keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God” (**D&C 14:7**).

We can understand why our Heavenly Father commands us to reverence life and to cherish the powers that produce it as sacred. If we do not have those reverential feelings in this life, how could our Father give them to us in the eternities? Family life here is the schoolroom in which we prepare for family life there. And to give us the opportunity for family life there was and is the purpose of creation. That is why the coming of Elijah was described this way: “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. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming” (**JS—H 1:39**).

For some of us, the test in the schoolroom of mortality will be to want marriage and children in this life

with all our hearts but to have them delayed or denied. Even such sorrow can be turned into a blessing by a just and loving Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. No one who strives with full faith and heart for the blessings of eternal life will be denied. And how great will be the joy and how much deeper the appreciation then after enduring in patience and faith now.

Achieving Happiness in Family Life

The proclamation describes our schooling here for family life:

“Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children. ‘Children are an heritage of the Lord’ (**Ps. 127:3**). Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God, and to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live. Husbands and wives—mothers and fathers—will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations.

“The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity. Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities. 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. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners. Disability, death, or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation. Extended families should lend support when needed.”

Those two paragraphs are filled with practical applications. There are things we can start to do now that have to do with providing for the spiritual and physical needs of a family. There are things we can do now to prepare, long before the need, so we can be at peace, knowing we have done all we can.

To begin with, we can decide to plan for success, not failure. Statistics are thrown at us every day in an effort to try to persuade us that a family composed of a loving father and mother with children loved, taught, and cared for in the way the proclamation enjoins is supposedly going the way of the dinosaurs, toward extinction. You have enough evidence in your own families to know that righteous people sometimes have their families ripped apart by circumstances beyond their control. It takes courage and faith to plan for what God holds before you as the ideal rather than what might be forced upon you by circumstances.

Conversely, there are important ways in which planning for failure can make failure more likely and the

ideal less so. Consider these twin commandments as an example: "Fathers are to ... provide the necessities of life ... for their families" and "mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children." Knowing how hard that might be, a young man might choose a career on the basis of how much money he could make, even if it meant he couldn't be home enough to be an equal partner. By doing that, he has already decided he cannot hope to do what would be best. A young woman might prepare for a career incompatible with being primarily responsible for the nurture of her children because of the possibilities of not marrying, of not having children, or of being left alone to provide for them herself. Or she might fail to focus her education on the gospel and the useful knowledge of the world that nurturing a family would require, not realizing that the highest and best use she could make of her talents and her education would be in her home. Consequently, because a young man and woman had planned thus, they might make what is best for a family less likely to be obtained.

Surely they are both wise to worry about the physical needs of that future family. The costs of buying a home, compared to average salaries, seem to be rising and jobs harder to hold. But there are other ways the young man and the young woman could think about preparing to provide for that future family. Income is only one part of it. Have you noticed husbands and wives who feel pinched for lack of money choose for a solution ways to make their family income keep rising but soon find that the pinch is there whatever the income? There is an old formula which goes something like this: Income five dollars and expenses six dollars: misery. Income four dollars and expenses three dollars: happiness.

Whether the young man can provide and, after work, return home to his family at a reasonable hour, and whether the young woman can be there to nurture children, can depend as much on how they learn to spend as on how they learn to earn. (President Brigham Young said it this way, speaking to us as much as he did to the people in his day: "If you wish to get rich, save what you get. A fool can earn money; but it takes a wise man to save and dispose of it to his own advantage. Then go to work, and save everything, and make your own bonnets and clothing.")³

In today's world, instead of telling young couples to make bonnets, President Young might suggest they think carefully about what they really need in cars, clothes, recreation, houses, vacations, and whatever they will someday try to provide for their children. And he might point out that the difference in cost between what the world says is necessary and what children really need could allow the margin in time that a father and a mother might need with their children in order to bring them home to their Heavenly Father.

Even the most frugal spending habits and the most careful planning for employment may not be enough to ensure success, but those things could be enough to allow us the peace that comes from knowing we did the best we could to provide and to nurture.

There is another way we could plan to succeed, despite the difficulties that might lie before us. The proclamation sets a high standard for us when it describes our obligation to teach our children. We are somehow to teach them so that they love one another and serve one another, keep the commandments, and are law-abiding citizens. If we think of good families who have not met that test, and few meet it

without some degree of failure over a generation or two, we could lose heart.

We cannot control what others choose to do, and so we cannot force our children to heaven, but we can determine what *we* will do. And *we* can decide that *we* will do all *we* can to bring down the powers of heaven into that family we want so much to have forever.

A key for us is in the proclamation: “Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

What could make it more likely that people in a family would love and serve one another, observe the commandments of God, and obey the law? It is not simply teaching them the gospel. It is in their hearing the word of God and then trying it in faith. If they do, their natures will be changed in a way that produces the happiness they seek. From Mormon, these words describe exactly how that change is the natural fruit of living the gospel of Jesus Christ:

“And the first fruits of repentance is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth remission of sins;

“And the remission of sins bringeth meekness, and lowliness of heart; and because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter filleth with hope and perfect love, which love endureth by diligence unto prayer, until the end shall come, when all the saints shall dwell with God” (**Moro. 8:25-26**).

When we prepare our children for baptism, if we do it well, we prepare them for the process that will bring the effects of the Atonement into their lives and the powers of heaven into our homes. Think of the change we all need. We need the Holy Ghost to fill us with hope and perfect love so that we can endure by diligence unto prayer. And then we can dwell forever with God in families. How can it come? By the simple promise Mormon described to his son, Moroni. Faith in Jesus Christ unto repentance and then baptism by those with authority lead to remission of sins. That produces meekness and lowliness of heart. And that in turn allows us to have the companionship of the Holy Ghost, which fills us with hope and perfect love.

Concerning this desired love and happiness, the proclamation is careful in what it promises: “Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ.” My heart aches a little to know that many who read those words will be surrounded by those who do not know or who deny the teachings of Jesus Christ. They can only do their best. But they can know this: their placement in a family, however challenging, is known by a loving Heavenly Father. They can know that a way is prepared for them to do all that will be required to qualify for eternal life. They may not see how God could give them that gift, nor with whom they will share it. Yet the promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ is sure:

“But learn that he who doeth the works of righteousness shall receive his reward, even peace in this

world, and eternal life in the world to come.

“I, the Lord, have spoken it, and the Spirit beareth record. Amen” (**D&C 59:23-24**).

That peace will come from the assurance that the Atonement has worked in our lives and from the hope of eternal life that springs from that assurance.

The proclamation warns that for those who fail to respond to its truths the result will be more disastrous than simply lack of peace in this life or absence of happiness. Here is the prophetic warning and the call to action, with which the proclamation ends:

“We warn that individuals who violate covenants of chastity, who abuse spouse or offspring, or who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God. Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.

“We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.”

The family unit is fundamental not only to society and to the Church but also to our hope for eternal life. We begin to practice in the family, the smaller unit, what will spread to the Church and to the society in which we live in this world, which will then be what we practice in families bound together forever by covenants and by faithfulness. We can start now to “promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family.” I pray that we will. I pray that you will ask, “Father, how can I prepare?” Tell him how much you want what he desires to give you. You will receive impressions, and if you act on them, I promise you the help of the powers of heaven.

I testify that our Heavenly Father lives, that we lived with him as spirits, and that we would be lonely living anywhere but with him in the world to come. I testify that Jesus Christ is our Savior, that by suffering for the sins of all of us he made possible the changes in you and me that can give us eternal life. I testify that the Holy Ghost can fill us with hope and with perfect love. And I testify that the sealing power restored to Joseph Smith and now held by President Gordon B. Hinckley can bind us in families and give us eternal life, if we do all that we can do in faith.

Gospel topics: family, plan of salvation

[illustration] Electronic illustration by Scott Welty; photo by Michael McRea; inset, below: painting by Robert T. Barrett

[illustrations] Electronic illustration by Scott Welty; models photographed by Craig Dimond

[illustration] Electronic illustration by Scott Welty. Right: Photo courtesy of Visual Resources Library; far right: photo by Steve Bunderson

© 2003 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved.