

# I Am a Child of God

By Elder Donald L. Hallstrom  
Of the Presidency of the Seventy

A correct understanding of our heavenly heritage is essential to exaltation.

Our most fundamental doctrine includes the knowledge that we are children of a living God. That is why one of His most sacred names is Father—Heavenly Father. This doctrine has been clearly taught by prophets through the ages:

- When tempted by Satan, Moses rebuffed him, saying: “Who art thou? For behold, I am a *son of God*.”<sup>1</sup>
- Addressing Israel, the Psalmist proclaimed, “All of you are *children of the most High*.”<sup>2</sup>
- Paul taught the Athenians on Mars Hill that they were “*offspring of God*.”<sup>3</sup>
- Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon received a vision in which they saw the Father and the Son, and a heavenly voice declared that the inhabitants of the worlds “are *begotten sons and daughters unto God*.”<sup>4</sup>
- In 1995, the 15 living apostles and prophets affirmed: “All human beings ... are created in the image of God. Each is a *beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents*.”<sup>5</sup>
- President Thomas S. Monson testified: “We are *sons and daughters of a living God*. ... We cannot sincerely hold this conviction without experiencing a profound new sense of strength and power.”<sup>6</sup>

This doctrine is so basic, so oft stated, and so instinctively simple that it can seem to be ordinary, when in reality it is among the most extraordinary knowledge we can obtain. A correct understanding of our heavenly heritage is essential to exaltation. It is foundational to comprehending the glorious plan of salvation and to nurturing faith in the Firstborn of the Father, Jesus the Christ, and in His

merciful Atonement.’ Further, it provides continual motivation for us to make and keep our indispensable eternal covenants.

With few exceptions, everyone participating in this meeting could right now, without written lyrics or music, sing “I Am a Child of God.”<sup>8</sup> This beloved hymn is one of the most often sung in this Church. But the critical question is, do we *really* know it? Do we know it in our mind and in our heart and in our soul? Is our heavenly parentage our first and most profound identity?

Here on earth, we identify ourselves in many different ways, including our place of birth, our nationality, and our language. Some even identify themselves by their occupation or their hobby. These earthly identities are not wrong *unless* they supersede or interfere with our eternal identity—that of being a son or a daughter of God.

When our youngest child was six years old and in the first grade at school, her teacher gave the children an in-class writing assignment. It was October, the month of Halloween, a holiday observed in some parts of the world. While it is not my favorite holiday, I suppose there may be some innocent and redeeming aspects of Halloween.

The teacher passed out a piece of paper to the young students. At the top was a roughly drawn picture of a mythical witch (I told you this was not my favorite holiday) standing over a boiling cauldron. The question posed on the page, to encourage the imaginations of the children and to test their rudimentary writing skills, was “You have just drunk a cup of the witch’s brew. What happened to you?” Please know that this story is not being shared as a recommendation to teachers.

“You have just drunk a cup of the witch’s brew. What happened to you?” With her best beginner’s writing, our little one wrote, “I will die and I will be in heaven. I will like it there. I would love it because it is the best place to be because you are with your Heavenly Father.” This answer likely surprised her teacher; however, when our daughter brought the completed assignment home, we noted that she was given a star, the highest grade.

In real life, we face actual, not imagined, hardships. There is pain—physical, emotional, and spiritual. There are heartbreaks when circumstances are very different from what we had anticipated. There is injustice when we do not seem to deserve our situation. There are disappointments when someone we trusted failed us. There are health and financial setbacks that can be disorienting. There may be times of question when a matter of doctrine or history is beyond our current understanding.

When difficult things occur in our lives, what is our immediate response? Is it confusion or doubt or spiritual withdrawal? Is it a blow to our faith? Do we blame God or others for our circumstances? Or is our first response to remember who we are—that we are children of a loving God? Is that coupled with an absolute trust that He allows some earthly suffering *because* He knows it will bless us, like a refiner's fire, to become like Him and to gain our eternal inheritance?<sup>9</sup>

Recently, I was in a meeting with Elder Jeffrey R. Holland. In teaching the principle that mortal life can be agonizing but our hardships have eternal purpose—even if we do not understand it at the time—Elder Holland said, “You can have what you want, or you can have something better.”

Five months ago, my wife, Diane, and I went to Africa with Elder and Sister David A. Bednar. The sixth and last country we visited was Liberia. Liberia is a great country with a noble people and a rich history, but things have not been easy there. Decades of political instability and civil wars have worsened the plague of poverty. On top of that, the dreaded Ebola disease killed nearly 5,000 people there during the latest outbreak. We were the first group of Church leaders from outside the area to visit Monrovia, the capital city, since the World Health Organization declared it safe to do so after the Ebola crisis.

On a very hot and humid Sunday morning, we traveled to a rented meeting facility in the center of the city. Every available chair was set up, totaling 3,500 seats. The final count of attendees was 4,100. Almost all who came had to travel by foot or some form of inconvenient public transportation; it was not easy for the Saints to gather. But they came. Most arrived several hours before the appointed meeting time. As we entered the hall, the spiritual atmosphere was electric! The Saints were prepared to be taught.

When a speaker quoted a scripture, the members would say the verse aloud. It did not matter—short scripture or long; the entire congregation responded in unison. Now, we do not necessarily recommend this, but it was certainly impressive that they could do it. And the choir—they were powerful. With an enthusiastic choir director and a 14-year-old young man at the keyboard, the members sang with vigor and strength.

Then Elder Bednar spoke. This, of course, was the anticipated highlight of the gathering—to hear an Apostle teach and testify. Clearly with spiritual direction, partway through his remarks, Elder Bednar stopped and said, “Do you know ‘How Firm a Foundation?’”

It seemed that 4,100 voices roared in response, “YES!”

He then asked, "Do you know verse 7?"

Again the entire group answered, "YES!"

The arrangement of the mighty hymn "How Firm a Foundation" sung by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir for the last 10 years has included verse 7, which was not sung much previously. Elder Bednar instructed, "Let's sing verses 1, 2, 3, and 7."

Without hesitation, the choir director jumped up and the Aaronic Priesthood-bearing accompanist immediately began to energetically play the introductory chords. With a level of conviction I have never felt before in a congregational hymn, we sang verses 1, 2, and 3. Then the volume and spiritual power was elevated when 4,100 voices sang the seventh verse and declared:

*The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose  
I will not, I cannot, desert to his foes;  
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I'll never, no never, I'll never, no never,  
I'll never, no never, no never forsake!<sup>10</sup>*

In one of the most remarkable spiritual events of my life, I was taught a profound lesson that day. We live in a world that can cause us to forget who we really are. The more distractions that surround us, the easier it is to treat casually, then ignore, and then forget our connection with God. The Saints in Liberia have little materially, and yet they seem to have everything spiritually. What we witnessed that day in Monrovia was a group of sons and daughters of God who knew it!

In today's world, no matter where we live and no matter what our circumstances are, it is essential that our preeminent identity is as a child of God. *Knowing* that will allow our faith to flourish, will motivate our continual repentance, and will provide the strength to "be steadfast and immovable" throughout our mortal journey.<sup>11</sup> In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.