

Gathering the Family of God

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God the Father wants His children home again, in families and in glory.

My dear brothers and sisters, I rejoice at the opportunity to be with you at the beginning of this session of general conference. I welcome you most warmly.

General conference has always been a time of gathering for the Latter-day Saints. We have long since outgrown the ability to gather physically in one place, but the Lord has provided ways for the blessings of general conference to reach out to you no matter where you are. While it is impressive to see the gathering of Saints in this large Conference Center, we who stand at this pulpit always have in our mind's eye the millions of people who are gathered with us around the world to watch and listen to the conference. Many of you are gathered with your families; some may be gathered with friends or fellow Church members.

Wherever you are and however you are hearing my voice, please know that even though you are not with us in person, we feel that you are with us in spirit. We hope all of you will feel one with us—that you will feel the spiritual power that comes whenever a body of believers gathers in the name of Jesus Christ.

I have felt impressed to speak to you today about another kind of gathering. This kind does not happen only every six months, as general conference does. Instead, it has been going on continuously since the early days of the Restoration of the Church, and it has been hastening in recent years. I refer to the gathering of the family of God.

To describe this gathering, it may be best to begin before we were born, before what the Bible calls “the beginning” (Genesis 1:1). At that time, we lived with Heavenly Father as His spirit children. This is true of every person who has ever lived on earth.

You see, the names “brother” and “sister” are not just friendly greetings or terms of endearment for us. They are an expression of an eternal truth: God is the literal Father of all mankind; we are each part of His eternal family. Because He loves us with the love of a perfect Father, He wants us to progress and advance and become like Him. He ordained a plan by which we would come to earth, in families, and have experiences that would prepare us to return to Him and live as He lives.

The central element of this plan was the promise that Jesus Christ would offer Himself as a sacrifice, to rescue us from sin and death. Our task in that plan is to accept the

Savior's sacrifice by obeying the laws and ordinances of the gospel. You and I accepted this plan. In fact, we rejoiced in it, even though it would mean that we would leave the presence of our Father and forget what we had experienced there with Him.

But we were not sent here completely in the dark. Each of us was given a portion of God's light, called the "Light of Christ," to help us distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong. This is why even those who live with little or no knowledge of the Father's plan can still sense, in their hearts, that certain actions are just and moral while others are not.

Our sense of right and wrong seems especially keen when we are raising our children. Innate in almost every parent is the desire to teach his or her children moral virtues. This is part of the miracle of Heavenly Father's plan. He wants His children to come to earth, following the eternal pattern of families that exists in heaven. Families are the basic organizational unit of the eternal realms, and so He intends for them also to be the basic unit on earth. Though earthly families are far from perfect, they give God's children the best chance to be welcomed to the world with the only love on earth that comes close to what we felt in heaven—parental love. Families are also the best way to preserve and pass on moral virtues and true principles that are most likely to lead us back to God's presence.

Only a very small minority of God's children obtain during this life a complete understanding of God's plan, along with access to the priesthood ordinances and covenants that make the Savior's atoning power fully operative in our lives. Even those with the best of parents may live faithfully according to the light they have but never hear about Jesus Christ and His Atonement or be invited to be baptized in His name. This has been true for countless millions of our brothers and sisters throughout the world's history.

Some may consider this unfair. They may even take it as evidence that there is no plan, no specific requirements for salvation—feeling that a just, loving God would not create a plan that is available to such a small proportion of His children. Others might conclude that God must have determined in advance which of His children He would save and made the gospel available to them, while those who never heard the gospel simply were not "chosen."

But you and I know, because of the truths restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith, that God's plan is much more loving and just than that. Our Heavenly Father is anxious to gather and bless all of His family. While He knows that not all of them will choose to be gathered, His plan gives each of His children the opportunity to accept or reject His invitation. And families are at the heart of this plan.

Centuries ago, the prophet Malachi said that in a coming day, God would send Elijah to "turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6).

This prophecy was so important the Savior quoted it when He visited the Americas after His Resurrection (see 3 Nephi 25:5–6). And when the angel Moroni visited the Prophet Joseph Smith, he too quoted the prophecy about Elijah and hearts, fathers, and children (see Joseph Smith—History 1:36–39).

Today is April 1. Two days from now, April 3, marks 181 years from the day when Malachi's prophecy was fulfilled. On that day, Elijah did come, and he gave to Joseph Smith the priesthood power to seal families eternally (see D&C 110:13–16).

From that day to this, interest in exploring one's family history has grown exponentially. At ever-increasing rates, people seem drawn to their ancestry with more than just casual curiosity. Genealogical libraries, associations, and technologies have emerged around the world to support this interest. The internet's power to enhance communications has enabled families to work together to do family history research with a speed and thoroughness never before possible.

Why is all of this happening? For lack of a better term, we call it the "spirit of Elijah." We could also equally call it "fulfillment of prophecy." I bear testimony that Elijah did come. The hearts of the children—of you and me—have turned to our fathers, our ancestors. The affection you feel for your ancestors is part of the fulfillment of that prophecy. It is deeply seated in your sense of who you are. But it has to do with more than just inherited DNA.

For example, as you follow the promptings to learn about your family history, you may discover that a distant relative shares some of your facial features or your interest in books or your talent for singing. This could be very interesting and even insightful. But if your work stops there, you will sense that something is missing. This is because to gather and unite God's family requires more than just warm feelings. It requires sacred covenants made in connection with priesthood ordinances.

Many of your ancestors did not receive those ordinances. But in the providence of God, you did. And God knew that you would feel drawn to your ancestors in love and that you would have the technology necessary to identify them. He also knew that you would live in a time when access to holy temples, where the ordinances can be performed, would be greater than ever in history. And He knew that He could trust you to accomplish this work in behalf of your ancestors.

Of course, all of us have many pressing and important responsibilities that need our attention and time. All of us find parts of what the Lord expects us to do beyond our abilities. Fortunately, the Lord provides a way for each of us to gain confidence and satisfaction in all our service, including family history service. We gain strength to do what He asks through our faith that the Savior gives no commandment "save he shall prepare a way for [us] that [we] may accomplish the thing which he commandeth" (1 Nephi 3:7).

I know this is true from experience. Many years ago, as a university student, I met a man who worked for one of the largest computer companies in the world. This was in the early days of computing, and it just so happened that his company had sent him to sell computers to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

As far as I could tell, this salesman had no religious faith. Yet he said with wonder and exasperation, "In this church they were doing what they called 'genealogy,' searching for names of people who are dead, trying to identify their ancestors. People, mostly women, were running around between filing cabinets, searching through little cards for information." If I remember right, he said the ladies were wearing tennis shoes so they could run a little faster. The man went on, "As I saw the magnitude of what they were trying to do, I realized that I had discovered the reason for the invention of computers."

Well, he was partially right. Computers would be an important part of the future of family history work—just not the computers he was selling. An inspired leader of the Church chose not to buy his computers. The Church was to wait for technology that at that time had not yet even been imagined. But I have learned in the many years since that even the best technology can never be a substitute for revelation from heaven, like the kind that Church leader received. This is a spiritual work, and the Lord directs it through His Holy Spirit.

Just a few weeks ago, I was working on my family history with a consultant by my side and another helper on the phone. On the computer screen before me was a problem beyond my mortal power to solve. I saw two names, sent to me by the wonders of technology, of people who might be waiting for a temple ordinance. But the trouble was that the names were different, but there was a reason to believe they might be the same person. My task was to determine what was true.

I asked my consultants to tell me. They said, "No, you must choose." And they were completely sure I would discover the truth. The computer, with all its power and information, had left me the blessing of staring at those names on a screen, evaluating the available information, seeking other research, praying silently, and discovering what was true. As I prayed, I knew with surety what to do—just as I have in other situations when I needed to rely on heaven's help to solve a problem.

We do not know what marvels God will inspire people to create to help in His work of gathering His family. But whatever marvelous inventions may come, their use will require the Spirit working in people like you and me. This should not surprise us. After all, these are beloved sons and daughters of God. He will send whatever inspiration is needed to give them the opportunity to return to Him.

In recent years, the youth of the Church have responded to the spirit of Elijah in an inspiring way. Many now hold their own limited-use temple recommend and use it often. Temple baptistries are busier than ever; some temples have even had to adjust

their schedules to accommodate the increase in the number of young people attending the temple.

It used to be a rare but welcome exception for youth to bring the names of their own ancestors to the temple. Now this is the norm, and very often it is the young people themselves who found those ancestors.

In addition, many youth have discovered that giving of their time to do family history research and temple work has deepened their testimony of the plan of salvation. It has increased the influence of the Spirit in their lives and decreased the influence of the adversary. It has helped them feel closer to their families and closer to the Lord Jesus Christ. They have learned that this work saves not just the dead; it saves all of us (see D&C 128:18).

The youth have caught the vision admirably; now their parents need to catch up. There are now many people who have accepted baptism in the spirit world because of the work done by the youth, and they are waiting for other ordinances that only adults can perform in temples in this world. The work of gathering Heavenly Father's family is not just for young people, and it is not just for grandparents. It is for everyone. We are all gatherers.

This is the work of our generation, what the Apostle Paul called "the dispensation of the fulness of times," when he said God would "gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him" (Ephesians 1:10). This is made possible through the atoning work of God's Beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Because of Him, our family members, "who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us" (Ephesians 2:13-14). You have felt this, as I have, when you have experienced an increase of love as you looked at the picture of an ancestor. You have felt it in the temple when the name on a card seemed like more than a name, and you couldn't help but sense that this person was aware of you and felt your love.

I testify that God the Father wants His children home again, in families and in glory. The Savior lives. He directs and blesses this work, and He watches over and guides us. He thanks you for your faithful service in gathering His Father's family, and I promise you the inspired help that you seek and need. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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