

Family History and Temple Work: Sealing and Healing

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When we gather our family histories and go to the temple on behalf of our ancestors, God fulfills promised blessings simultaneously on both sides of the veil.

Family relationships can be some of the most rewarding yet challenging experiences we encounter. Many of us have faced a fracture of some sort within our families. Such a fracture developed between two heroes of the Restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ in these latter days. Parley and Orson Pratt were brothers, early converts, and ordained Apostles. Each faced a trial of faith but came through with an unshakable testimony. Both sacrificed and contributed greatly for the cause of truth.

During the Nauvoo era, their relationship became strained, culminating in a heated, public confrontation in 1846. A deep and prolonged rift developed. Parley initially wrote to Orson to resolve the rift, but Orson did not reply. Parley gave up, feeling that correspondence was over forever, unless initiated by Orson.¹

Several years later, in March 1853, Orson learned about a project to publish a book on the descendants of William Pratt, the brothers' earliest American ancestor. Orson began to weep "like a little child" as he glimpsed this treasure trove of family history. His heart melted, and he determined to repair the breach with his brother.

Orson wrote to Parley, "Now my dear brother, there are none among all the descendants of our Ancestor, Lieut[enant] William Pratt, who have so deep an interest in searching out his descendants as ourselves." Orson was one of the first to understand that Latter-day Saints have an obligation to research and compile family histories so that we can perform vicarious ordinances for our ancestors. His letter continued: "We know that the God of our fathers has had a hand in all this. ... I will beg pardon for having been so backward in writing to you. ... I hope you will forgive me."² Despite their unshakable testimonies, their love for their ancestors was the catalyst to heal a rift, mend a hurt,³ and seek and extend forgiveness.³

When God directs us to do one thing, He often has many purposes in mind. Family history and temple work is not only for the dead but blesses the living as well. For Orson and Parley, it turned their hearts to each other. Family history and temple work provided the power to heal that which needed healing.

As Church members, we do have a divinely appointed responsibility to seek out our ancestors and compile family histories. This is far more than an encouraged hobby, because the ordinances of salvation are necessary for all of God's children.⁴ We are to identify our own ancestors who died without receiving the ordinances of salvation. We can perform the ordinances vicariously in temples, and our ancestors may choose to accept the ordinances.⁵ We are also encouraged to help ward and stake members with their family names. It is

breathhtakingly amazing that, through family history and temple work, we can help to redeem the dead.

But as we participate in family history and temple work today, we also lay claim to “healing” blessings promised by prophets and apostles.⁶ These blessings are also breathtakingly amazing because of their scope, specificity, and consequence in mortality. This long list includes these blessings:

- Increased understanding of the Savior and His atoning sacrifice;
- Increased influence of the Holy Ghost⁷ to feel strength and direction for our own lives;
- Increased faith, so that conversion to the Savior becomes deep and abiding;
- Increased ability and motivation to learn and repent⁸ because of an understanding of who we are, where we come from, and a clearer vision of where we are going;
- Increased refining, sanctifying, and moderating influences in our hearts;
- Increased joy through an increased ability to feel the love of the Lord;
- Increased family blessings, no matter our current, past, or future family situation or how imperfect our family tree may be;
- Increased love and appreciation for ancestors and living relatives, so we no longer feel alone;
- Increased power to discern that which needs healing and thus, with the Lord’s help, serve others;
- Increased protection from temptations and the intensifying influence of the adversary; and
- Increased assistance to mend troubled, broken, or anxious hearts and make the wounded whole.⁹

If you have prayed for any of these blessings, participate in family history and temple work. As you do so, your prayers will be answered. When ordinances are performed on behalf of the deceased, God’s children on earth are healed. No wonder President Russell M. Nelson, in his first message as President of the Church, declared, “Your worship in the temple and your service there for your ancestors will bless you with increased personal revelation and peace and will fortify your commitment to stay on the covenant path.”¹⁰

An earlier prophet also foresaw blessings for both the living and the dead.¹¹ A heavenly messenger showed Ezekiel a vision of a temple with water gushing out of it. Ezekiel was told:

“These waters issue out ... and go down into the desert, and go into the [dead] sea ... , [and] the waters shall be healed.

“And it shall come to pass, that every thing that liveth, which moveth, whithersoever the rivers shall come, shall live: ... for they shall be healed; and every thing shall live whither the river cometh.”¹²

Two characteristics of the water are noteworthy. First, though the small stream had no tributaries, it grew into a mighty river, becoming wider and deeper the farther it flowed. Something similar happens with the blessings that flow from the temple as individuals are sealed as families. Meaningful growth occurs going backward and forward through the generations as sealing ordinances weld families together.

Second, the river renewed everything that it touched. The blessings of the temple likewise have a stunning capacity to heal. Temple blessings can heal hearts and lives and families.

Let me illustrate. In 1999 a young man named Todd collapsed from a ruptured blood vessel in his brain. Although Todd and his family were members of the Church, their activity had been sporadic, and none had experienced the blessings of the temple. On the last night of Todd's life, his mother, Betty, sat at his bedside stroking his hand and said, "Todd, if you really do have to go, I promise I'll see to it that your temple work gets done." The next morning, Todd was declared brain dead. Surgeons transplanted Todd's heart into my patient, a remarkable individual named Rod.

A few months after the transplant, Rod learned the identity of his heart donor's family and began to correspond with them. About two years later, Todd's mother, Betty, invited Rod to be present when she went to the temple for the first time. Rod and Betty first met in person in the celestial room of the St. George Utah Temple.

Sometime thereafter, Todd's father—Betty's husband—died. A couple of years later, Betty invited Rod to vicariously represent her deceased son in receiving his temple ordinances. Rod gratefully did so, and the proxy work culminated in a sealing room in the St. George Utah Temple. Betty was sealed to her deceased husband, kneeling across the altar from her grandson who served as proxy. Then, with tears streaming down her cheeks, she beckoned for Rod to join them at the altar. Rod knelt beside them, acting as proxy for her son, Todd, whose heart was still beating inside Rod's chest. Rod's heart donor, Todd, was then sealed to his parents for all eternity. Todd's mother had kept the promise she made to her dying son years before.

But the story does not end there. Fifteen years after his heart transplant, Rod became engaged to be married and asked me to perform the sealing in the Provo Utah Temple. On the wedding day, I met with Rod and his marvelous bride, Kim, in a room adjacent to the sealing room, where their families and closest friends were waiting. After briefly visiting with Rod and Kim, I asked if they had any questions.

Rod said, "Yes. My donor family is here and would love to meet you."

I was caught off guard and asked, "You mean they're here? Right now?"

Rod replied, "Yes."

I stepped around the corner and called the family out of the sealing room. Betty, her daughter, and her son-in-law joined us. Rod greeted Betty with a hug, thanked her for coming, and then introduced me to her. Rod said, "Betty, this is Elder Renlund. He was the doctor who took care of your son's heart for so many years." She crossed the room and embraced me. And for the next several minutes, there were hugs and tears of joy all around.

After we regained our composure, we moved into the sealing room, where Rod and Kim were sealed for time and all eternity. Rod, Kim, Betty, and I can testify that heaven was very close, that there were others with us that day who had previously passed through the veil of mortality.

God, in His infinite capacity, seals and heals individuals and families despite tragedy, loss, and hardship. We sometimes compare the feelings we experience in temples as having caught a glimpse of heaven.¹³ That day in the Provo Utah Temple, this statement by C. S. Lewis resonated with me: “[Mortals] say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory. ... The Blessed will say, ‘We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven.’”¹⁴

God will strengthen, help, and uphold us;¹⁵ and He will sanctify to us our deepest distress.¹⁶ When we gather our family histories and go to the temple on behalf of our ancestors, God fulfills many of these promised blessings simultaneously on both sides of the veil. Similarly, we are blessed when we help others in our wards and stakes do the same. Members who do not live close to a temple also receive these blessings by participating in family history work, collecting the names of their ancestors for temple ordinances to be performed.

President Russell M. Nelson, however, cautioned: “We can be inspired all day long about temple and family history experiences others have had. But we must do something to actually experience the joy ourselves.” He continued, “I invite you to prayerfully consider what kind of sacrifice—preferably a sacrifice of time—you can make [to] do more temple and family history work.”¹⁷ As you accept President Nelson’s invitation, you will discover, gather, and connect your family. Additionally, blessings will flow to you and your family like the river spoken of by Ezekiel. You will find healing for that which needs healing.

Orson and Parley Pratt experienced the healing and sealing effects of family history and temple work early in this dispensation. Betty, her family, and Rod experienced it. You can too. Through His atoning sacrifice, Jesus Christ offers these blessings to all, both the dead and the living. Because of these blessings, we will find that we, metaphorically, “have never lived anywhere except ... Heaven.”¹⁸ I so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.