

# Covenant Belonging

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To belong with God and to walk with each other on His covenant path is to be blessed by covenant belonging.

Dear brothers and sisters, the story is told of a Primary child learning to pray. “Thank you for the letter A, the letter B, ... the letter G.” The child’s prayer continues, “Thank you for the letters X, Y, Z. Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the number 1, the number 2.” The Primary teacher worries but wisely waits. The child says, “Thank you for the number 5, the number 6—and thank you for my Primary teacher. She’s the only person who’s ever let me finish my prayer.”

Heavenly Father does hear every child’s prayer. With infinite love, He beckons us to come believe and belong by covenant.

This world is full of mirage, illusion, sleight of hand. So much seems transitory and superficial. When we put aside the masks, pretense, crowd-sourced likes and dislikes, we yearn for more than fleeting veneer, ephemeral connection, or the pursuit of worldly self-interest. Gratefully, there is a way through to answers that matter.

When we come to God’s great commandments to love Him and those around us by covenant, we do so not as stranger or guest but as His child at home.<sup>1</sup> The age-old paradox is still true. In losing our worldly self through covenant belonging, we find and become our best eternal self<sup>2</sup>—free, alive, real—and define our most important relationships. Covenant belonging is to make and keep solemn promises to God and each other through sacred ordinances that invite the power of godliness to be manifest in our lives.<sup>3</sup> When we covenant all we are, we can become more than we are. Covenant belonging gives us place, narrative, capacity to become. It produces faith unto life and salvation.<sup>4</sup>

Divine covenants become a source of love for and from God and thereby for and with each other. God, our Heavenly Father, loves us more and knows us better than we love or know ourselves. Faith in Jesus Christ and personal change (repentance) bring mercy, grace, forgiveness. These comfort the hurt, loneliness, injustice we experience in mortality. Being God, our Heavenly Father wants us to receive God’s greatest gift—His joy, His eternal life.<sup>5</sup>

Our God is a God of covenant. By His nature, He “keepeth covenant and showeth mercy.”<sup>6</sup> His covenants endure “so long as time shall last, or the earth shall stand, or there shall be one man upon the face thereof to be saved.”<sup>7</sup> We are not meant to wander in existential uncertainty and doubt but to rejoice in cherished covenant relationships “stronger than the cords of death.”<sup>8</sup>

God's ordinances and covenants are universal in their requirement and individual in their opportunity. In God's fairness, each individual in every place and age can receive saving ordinances. Agency applies—individuals choose whether to accept offered ordinances. God's ordinances provide guideposts on His path of covenants. We call God's plan to bring His children home the plan of redemption, plan of salvation, plan of happiness. Redemption, salvation, celestial happiness are possible because Jesus Christ "wrought out this perfect atonement."<sup>9</sup>

To belong with God and to walk with each other on His covenant path is to be blessed by covenant belonging.

First, covenant belonging centers in Jesus Christ as "mediator of the new covenant."<sup>10</sup> All things can work together for our good when we are "sanctified in Christ ... in the covenant of the Father."<sup>11</sup> Every good and promised blessing comes to those who remain faithful to the end. The "happy state of those that keep the commandments of God" is to be "blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual," and to "dwell with God in ... never-ending happiness."<sup>12</sup>

As we honor our covenants, we may sometimes feel we are in the company of angels. And we will be—those we love and who bless us on this side of the veil and those who love and bless us from the other side of the veil.

Recently Sister Gong and I saw covenant belonging at its tender best in a hospital room. A young father desperately needed a kidney transplant. His family had wept, fasted, and prayed for him to receive a kidney. When news came that a life-saving kidney had just become available, his wife quietly said, "I hope the other family is OK." To belong by covenant is, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me."<sup>13</sup>

Along life's path, we may lose faith in God, but He never loses faith in us. As it were, His porch light is always on. He invites us to come or return to the covenants that mark His path. He waits ready to embrace us, even when we are "yet a great way off."<sup>14</sup> When we look with an eye of faith for the patterns, arc, or connected dots of our experience, we can see His tender mercies and encouragement, especially in our trials, sorrows, and challenges, as well as in our joys. However often we stumble or fall, if we keep moving toward Him, He will help us, a step at a time.

Second, the Book of Mormon is evidence we can hold in our hand of covenant belonging. The Book of Mormon is the promised instrument for the gathering of God's children, prophesied as a new covenant.<sup>15</sup> As we read the Book of Mormon, by ourselves and with others, whether silently or aloud, we can ask God "with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ," and receive by the power of the Holy Ghost God's assurance that the Book of Mormon is true.<sup>16</sup> This includes assurance that Jesus Christ is our Savior, Joseph Smith is the prophet of the Restoration, and the Lord's Church is called by His name—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>17</sup>

The Book of Mormon speaks by ancient and modern covenant to you who are the children of Lehi, “children of the prophets.”<sup>18</sup> Your forefathers received a covenant promise that you, their descendants, would recognize a voice as if from the dust in the Book of Mormon.<sup>19</sup> That voice you feel as you read testifies you are “children of the covenant”<sup>20</sup> and Jesus is your Good Shepherd.

The Book of Mormon invites each of us, in Alma’s words, to enter “into a covenant with [the Lord], that [we] will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon [us].”<sup>21</sup> When we want to change for the better—as one person put it, “to stop being miserable and to be happy being happy”—we can become open to direction, help, and strength. We can come by covenant to belong with God and a community of faithful believers and receive the blessings promised in the doctrine of Christ<sup>22</sup>—now.

Restored priesthood authority and power to bless all His children is a third dimension of covenant belonging. In this dispensation, John the Baptist and the Apostles Peter, James, and John have come as glorified messengers from God to restore His priesthood authority.<sup>23</sup> God’s priesthood and His ordinances sweeten relationships on earth and can seal covenant relationships in heaven.<sup>24</sup>

Priesthood can bless literally from cradle to grave—from an infant’s name and blessing to a grave dedication. Priesthood blessings heal, comfort, counsel. A father was angry with his son until forgiving love came as the father gave his son a tender priesthood blessing. The only member of the Church in her family, a dear young woman was uncertain about God’s love for her until she received an inspired priesthood blessing. Across the world, noble patriarchs prepare spiritually to give patriarchal blessings. As the patriarch lays his hands on your head, he feels and expresses God’s love for you. He pronounces your lineage in the house of Israel. He indicates blessings from the Lord. Typically thoughtful, one patriarch’s wife told me how she and her family invite the Spirit, especially on days their papa is giving patriarchal blessings.

Finally, the blessings of covenant belonging come when we follow the Lord’s prophet and rejoice in temple-covenant living, including in marriage. Covenant marriage becomes supernal and eternal as we daily choose the happiness of our spouse and family before our own. As “me” becomes “we,” we grow together. We grow old together; we grow young together. As we bless each other across a lifetime of forgetting ourselves, we find our hopes and joys sanctified in time and eternity.

While situations differ, when we do all we can, the best we can, and sincerely ask and seek His help along the way, the Lord will guide us, in His time and manner, by the Holy Ghost.<sup>25</sup> Marriage covenants are binding by mutual choice of those making them—a reminder of God’s and our respect for agency and the blessing of His help when we unitedly seek it.

The fruits of covenant belonging across family generations are felt in our homes and hearts. Please allow me to illustrate with personal examples.

When Sister Gong and I were falling in love toward marriage, I learned about agency and decisions. For a period of time, we were in school studying in two different countries on two different continents. It is why I can honestly say I earned a PhD in international relations.

When I asked, “Heavenly Father, should I marry Susan?” I felt peace. But it was when I learned to pray with real intent, “Heavenly Father, I love Susan and want to marry her. I promise I will be the best husband and father I can be”—when I acted and made my best decisions, it was then the strongest spiritual confirmations came.

Now our Gong and Lindsay FamilySearch family trees, stories, and photos help us discover and connect through the lived experience of generational covenant belonging.<sup>26</sup> For us, respected progenitors include:



Great-Grandma Alice Blauer Bangerter, who had three marriage proposals in one day, later asked her husband to rig a foot pedal to her butter churn so she could churn butter, knit, and read at the same time.



Great-Grandpa Loy Kuei Char carried his children on his back and his family's few belongings on a donkey as they crossed the lava fields on Hawaii's Big Island. Generations of Char family commitment and sacrifice bless our family today.



Gram Mary Alice Powell Lindsay was left with five young children when her husband and oldest son both died suddenly just days apart. A widow for 47 years, Gram raised her family with sustaining love from local leaders and members. During those many years, Gram promised the Lord if He would help her, she would never complain. The Lord helped her. She never complained.

Dear brothers and sisters, as witnessed by the Holy Ghost, everything good and eternal is centered in the living reality of God, our Eternal Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ, and His Atonement. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, is the Mediator of the new covenant. Testifying of Jesus Christ is a covenant purpose of the Book of Mormon.<sup>27</sup> By oath and covenant, God's restored priesthood authority is intended to bless all God's children, including through covenant marriage, generational family, and individual blessings.

Our Savior declares, "I am Alpha and Omega, Christ the Lord; yea, even I am he, the beginning and the end, the Redeemer of the world."<sup>28</sup>

With us at the beginning, He is with us, in all our covenant belonging, to the end. I so testify in the sacred and holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.