

Family: The Eternal Perspective¹

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I am happy to be with you this evening, and especially grateful to have my wife, Jean, with me. I commend you for the great work you are doing in Family History. I am aware of the technological advances that have been and are being made almost daily in many fields of endeavor, including Family History. I thank you for applying these Heaven-inspired resources, to make this vital work more reliable, more accessible and more doable.

This evening, however, I have chosen to address my remarks not to the technological, but to the spiritual side of the work. We live in a physical world and have physical bodies, but it is our spirit that gives us life. It is the spirit that gives life to all things, including Family History. Without the spirit there is no existence, no understanding, no life. It is our spirit that can see beyond this mortal sphere and help us understand where we came from, why we are here and where we go after mortality. Only as we see beyond the limits of mortal life can we understand the real meaning of our existence and the eternal importance of family.

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The world today is confused in their attempts to define and understand a family. Without, in any way, decrying the efforts of many good people who are sincere in their research, I submit to you that the only way anyone, anywhere, in any age can truly understand what a family is and what its ultimate purpose is, is through the teachings of God, as given through scriptures, prophets, prayer, and obedience to the same. Thus, I have titled my remarks: "Family: The Eternal Perspective." Since God is eternal we could also title them: "The Family from God's Perspective."

The Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis. 1:1). After God created the earth and made it livable, He established a family, patterned after His family in Heaven. First he created Adam. But Adam alone was not a family. So he created Eve. She became not only a help-mate, but a soul-mate and completed the foundation for continuing families.

God gave Adam and Eve to each other in the Garden of Eden before death was part of the equation, so we know they were intended to be together forever. Through a series of events mortality came about, and the families of this earth began to be. They have continued and will continue until every spirit assigned to this earth has had a chance to be housed in an earthly "tabernacle of clay."

As we come to earth we are taught to pray: "Our Father which art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name (Matthew 6:9)." When we address "Our Father in Heaven," we are

reminded that He is the Father of our spirits and that we lived with Him in a family in Heaven before we came to this earth and became part of another family. Only here, our spirit would be housed in a mortal body which God gave our earthly father and mother power to produce. A veil of forgetfulness was drawn over us so we could better learn to live by faith. But we didn't forget everything.

Deep inside each of us is an intense longing to experience the same joy, love and security in our earthly family that we enjoyed in our Heavenly family.

Individually we are part of God's eternal family, but He wants to teach us how we can have our own eternal family. Part of that process is to come to this earth and link our earthly family; both those who came before us and those who come after us.

As near as I can tell we agreed to three essential responsibilities when we came to earth:

1. To live our lives according to God's commandments so we can go to the temple and properly link the past to the future.
2. To teach our families and our neighbors the gospel, search out our ancestors and do vicarious temple work for them.
3. To have children and teach them gospel truths, especially about families so they will continue the linking process.

Let me illustrate these three parts with a symbol. Picture yourself as a couple looking into each other's eyes. Now picture a mirror behind each of you, tilted so that the reflections bounce back and forth and go on forever down the stream of time and on into infinity. You, as husband and wife, are in the middle. The endless reflections on one side represent your ancestors—those who have gone before, making it possible for you to be here. The endless reflections on the other side represent your posterity—those to come who will continue the chain of your eternal family. But we are in the middle. Think of it. If we aren't worthy, if we don't do the work for our ancestors and if we don't get married and have children, we will not have linked our generation! These endless images can only be seen by each spouse as he or she looks through the eye of the other spouse. In other words, we can't do it alone. We need each other. Just as Adam needed Eve, so we need our spouses! In one sense, all eternity is focused on this one couple and waits for them to act. Thankfully they are not alone. Those who have gone before and those who are yet to come can have a mighty influence on us, if we will let them. I know something of these influences.

Let me give three personal examples of influences from the past, the present and the future. **First, the past:** as a mission president in Tonga I needed to visit some elders on a distant island. The only boat available was old and dirty. Jean was nursing our three-month old daughter, Gayle, but she wanted to come along, so she made arrangements for

someone to watch the older girls and we took passage on what the locals called "the rolling tub."

I arranged for the only so-called room on the boat, which was nothing more than a small enclosure with two narrow planks against one wall called "bunks." We stayed on deck as much as possible as the air was so bad in the tiny room.

The roughness of that voyage was unbelievable. The waves crashed across the deck, making it slippery and cold. Even though the air was much better on deck, for safety's sake I felt we should stay in our bunks. Jean tried to lie down with Gayle on the lower board. I tried to stay put on the upper one.

The rolling and jerking of the boat became so violent that we were often thrown out of our bunks and smashed against the floor and the opposite wall which was only a couple of feet away. I was afraid I might come crashing down on Jean and the baby if we were thrown from our bunks at the same time.

The best thing I could think of was for Jean and the baby to stay on the lower bunk and for me to sit on the floor with my back against their bunk, with my feet braced against the opposite wall. This way I could be somewhat stationary, and when Jean and the baby were pitched to the open side of the bunk they would roll against my back rather than onto the floor.

The floor was hard, wet and cold, and my legs and back were cramped from the constant strain. It was a long, miserable night.

Gayle clung tenaciously to Jean and was able to nurse and sleep on and off. I wondered how long I could hold out. All during that long dark night we were in constant turmoil. The pitching boat, the pounding waves, and the shrieking wind tore not only at my comfort but at my faith. Why is all this happening? I wondered.

At one point during the night I turned and looked at Jean and Gayle and felt the trauma and pain they were experiencing. I wanted to get them out of this situation, but there was nothing I could do. I asked: "Why did I bring Jean and the baby? Why is this happening? If the Savior calmed the Sea of Galilee, why not calm this sea?" On and on went the questions. I was hurting, and suddenly a wave of self-pity started to enter my mind.

At that precise moment, another influence flooded my mind. It was as though someone were talking to me someone who was close to me someone I knew from somewhere. I couldn't tell who, but I knew it was a faithful woman who knew me and loved me. Her influence filled my mind in a peaceful yet firm way, and I clearly felt the message: "Do not complain. You have no right to complain. You should be grateful for the opportunity to serve the Lord, to help build His kingdom. No sacrifice is too great for His sake. Think of what He did for you. Don't complain. Don't even think of complaining."

These impressions filled my heart and mind. What a blessing and comfort they were! I was still terribly uncomfortable and seasick, my back and legs still hurt, the night was still dark and the sea was still rough, but for some wonderfully beautiful reason the thought of complaining left me entirely. Like a cloud of darkness, it had been chased away by a flood of goodness and light.

I knew I had been helped by an outside force. I closed my eyes and thanked God for His goodness and help and asked for His protection as we continued our voyage. I expressed my deep appreciation for whoever had influenced my thinking so positively that frightful night. We landed safely the next morning.

Years later I was reading a history of my great-grandmother, Elizabeth Susan Burnett Brunt. She was born in London but as a youth went to New Zealand, where she married and had several children. She and her husband heard the Latter-day Saint missionaries in Kaipoi, near Christchurch, around 1870 and were converted. As was the custom in those days, the missionaries asked them to gather to "Zion." Accordingly she and her husband began making arrangements to leave New Zealand for Utah.

They had difficulty selling their farm so it was determined that she would take their four small children and go by boat to San Francisco and on to Salt Lake City. Her husband stayed to settle affairs in New Zealand and followed a year later.

I pondered on the faith of that young mother with four small children heading out alone from New Zealand to her desert Zion in Utah. Who knows the hardships, the trials, the discouragements she passed through?

Then something really caught my attention. It was a brief comment that at one point on their voyage to San Francisco the boat encountered extremely rough seas and she and the children became very ill. The picture of that moment filled my mind. I could literally see them tossing, both physically and emotionally, on that merciless sea. She was alone and discouraged and almost felt to complain, but as she prayed she remembered that she was a member of God's true church and was on her way to Zion. She was helped to realize that no problem was too big and no sacrifice too great as long as she attained her Zion. She promised herself she would never complain, or even think of complaining, and prayed that none of her posterity would either.

I was spellbound. I looked at a world map and traced the probable route of her ship. She would have been in almost exactly the same location on the same ocean as Jean and Gayle and I were, only she was there nearly a hundred years earlier!

I was so overwhelmed with gratitude for the faith of this good woman that I didn't know what to do. I realized there really wasn't anything to do except express my appreciation and increase my determination never to complain about anything I was asked to do in the Savior's cause. I expressed those heartfelt feelings of gratitude through prayer.

As I did I felt again some of the same love and peace I had felt on that turbulent ocean in Tonga those many years before.

Once again I saw Jean's uncomplaining face through that tumultuous night. Then I saw her smile as she first stepped ashore the next morning. It melted me to tears. As I basked in its warmth I thought I detected a faint wisp of another smile and was confident it belonged to my great-grandmother Brunt.

I wondered: "Are there such things as spiritual genes? Are there spiritual pools of traits that can help shape us, similar to the way physical genes do?" I didn't have an answer, but I was sure that the best thing we could do for our posterity is to be faithful ourselves. I know every person has his or her own moral agency and can accept or reject help offered them. But what a great blessing it is if the available "pool" of help contains much of faith and devotion and goodness. How important to build as much goodness and faith as possible in our lives! Not only will it help us now but it has the potential of being helpful to others down the stream of time.

Now let me move to **a second** experience on the influence of people in the present.

While serving as a young missionary in Tonga in the mid 1950's, I was assigned to the small, distant island of Niuatoputapu. At one point a hurricane hit this island wreaking vast destruction. Because of its isolated location we were left on our own for over two months with no outside contact.

Food was scarce, but I had plenty of time to ponder. I reflected on the scripture, "Be still and know that I am God." I had always thought of that scripture as a statement to watch for His salvation after we had done all we could. Now I looked upon it more as an invitation: "Be still (sit quietly, get rid of outside pressures, go to the temple, for example, don't worry about this world) and know that I am God your Father." Or: "Be still so you can know that I am God your Father. Study and learn of Me and My ways." If one of the purposes of life is to know and love God, then maybe one of Satan's best weapons to keep us from that knowledge is to keep us so busy, even doing good things, that we don't allow ourselves time to be still so we can know that God is our all-powerful and all-loving Father in Heaven!

The ninth week began with essentially no food and little outward change. There was, however, a great inward change. I started talking, or at least thinking to myself, saying, "Well, maybe my mortal life will end here." It was not a panicky feeling, I was past that stage. It was a calm feeling, an assured feeling, a feeling that it really didn't matter, because I knew all would be right.

I was pretty much skin and bones by now. I remember being aware of my ribs sticking out, of sensing my heart beating and my lungs breathing, and feeling a great wonderment for the miracle of the human body. What a marvelous mechanism the Lord has put together to house our equally marvelous spirit! The thought of a permanent union of these two elements, made possible through the Savior's love, suffering, and resurrection,

was so inspiring and satisfying that any small physical discomfort faded into nothingness. What a great blessing to know that things will be right! What a tremendous blessing faith is! Faith is the opposite of fear. We fear what we don't understand. When we truly understand that God is our Father and we are His children, and that He loves us very much and has a plan for us which includes an eternal family, fear evaporates.

I was so weak by now that I often dozed. At times I wasn't entirely sure where I was. Sometimes there is a very fine line between "here" and "there." I didn't know which side of the veil I would end up on, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was that God was in His heaven, and He knew me and my situation; He would make sure that which was right was done, for as far as I knew, I had done all I could.

I jotted down a phrase, which undoubtedly is not original but which came at that time with the power of firsthand knowledge: "The only thing that is important is your standing in the sight of your Father in Heaven. If that is as it should be, nothing else matters. If that is not as it should be, nothing else counts."

As I sat there, I realized more and more how much I had to learn. I was genuinely excited about getting on with that learning on whichever side of the veil the Lord deemed most appropriate. I wish I could always have that zest for learning spiritual things. I understood clearly that the spiritual is more important and more powerful than the physical

and, in fact, controls all physical things. I understood that both physical and spiritual elements are necessary and are in effect one when fully comprehended and perfected.

I learned a lot about relationships: our relationship to our Father in Heaven and to the Savior, Their relationship to us, our relationship to each other as members of God's family, and the all-important role of the Holy Ghost in conveying and confirming the correct understanding of these relationships. I learned a little about our relationship to this earth, the earth's relationship to this solar system, its relationship to the universe, and the relationship between systems, universes, stars, and also something about how they are governed. I know families were a major element of all this. I didn't understand much, but I sensed the grand design. I understood that people unchallenged are largely people undeveloped, be it physically, mentally, or spiritually.

I realized that just as rockets must overcome the pull of gravity in order to roar into space, so we must overcome the pull of the world in order to soar into the eternal realms of understanding. That is where God is, that is where our eternal family is, and that is important!

There came a time when I realized I only had enough strength to write one more letter. I wondered who I should write to and what I should say. It would seem natural to write to my parents, but the impression came very strongly to me to write to Jean, to tell her of my love and ask her to comfort my parents if I did not make it.

As I finished this letter, a scripture filled my soul and I knew I had done what was right. "Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shall cleave unto her and none else" (D & C 42:22). Even though Jean was not yet my wife it was clear what I should do.

A boat arrived the next day with food on it. I remember taking my first bite of *ma pakupaku* (dried biscuits), closing my eyes, and crying. When I opened my eyes, those about me were crying as well. Some said how good it was to eat again and to feel this great gratitude to God for saving our lives. But I felt something deeper. I would never say I was unhappy with being able to eat again, and I was content that life here would go on as before. Still I had a wistful feeling, a subtle sense of postponement, as when darkness finally closes the brilliant colors of a perfect sunset and you realize you must wait for another evening to enjoy such beauty again. Fortunately, life can be colored by the memory of that brilliance which, while not always discernible, is always available and can be drawn upon, especially in times of great need.

Let me show a brief clip of an artist's attempt to depict these events and these feelings.

Video Clip

For several weeks after the relief boat arrived, I had a series of special feelings and experiences, which were mostly family-oriented. I sensed that families are *the* important thing. I understood this was not only the nuclear family we tend to think of, such as mother,

father, and children, but the broader family, often called multi-generational, extended family, clan, kin, tribe, or whatever. I knew for sure that all of us, married or single, male or female, old or young, light or dark, are part of this larger family unit and we need to understand it and appreciate it even more than we do. I felt that the Tongans may have a better understanding of the true eternal nature of family than some Westerners do.

As I thought of some in our society putting other things ahead of family, such as their own convenience, schooling, friends, or other conditions, I almost gasped with disbelief. We are here to do things for others that they cannot do for themselves, such as vicarious temple ordinances and having children. I remember thinking, "If we don't search out and do work for our ancestors, who will? If we delay or refuse to have children, where will God send them?"

As I thought of the eternal consequences of putting worldly things ahead of God and family, I literally shuddered.

I became firmly convinced that we should always look at the eternal perspective in all we do and say, for only by acting according to that perspective can we find safety and joy.

Reflecting on this experience, one of our daughters and her husband created a poster that captures the essence of those feelings. (There is a connection between Heaven and earth.)

Now, the **third** experience about the influences of the future.

While serving as a mission president in Tonga in the 1960's, our first son was born. Our five daughters were as excited as we were. Unfortunately, it turned out that he was born with a congenital kidney defect which would not allow him to live unless corrected. There were no facilities or trained personnel in Tonga to do this. After much fasting and prayer by thousands of faithful Tongans, the Lord promised them He would preserve our son's life long enough for Jean to take him to the Primary Children's Hospital where he could get the care he needed.

I would stay in Tonga with our five young daughters and Jean would take our son to Utah. The only international flights were from Nadi, Fiji which at that time was part of our mission.

Let me explain some of my feelings as Jean and our son left on that late night flight from Fiji.

When they announced the flight departure, I held Jean and John Enoch for as long as I could before kissing them good-bye and watching them board the plane. When would I see them and hold them in my arms again? I knew we were doing what was right and the end result, whatever it was, would be right, but it was still hard.

I had a heavy feeling as I watched those precious souls board the plane. I watched the door close and the giant craft leave the terminal, taxi to the end of the runway, and prepare to begin its long flight to America.

I found a secluded spot where I could see the plane, which was now at the far end of the runway. It was the darkest hour of the night, not long before sunrise. Nearly everyone had left the airport, so I was virtually alone.

I watched the flashing red lights and the powerful white lights of the plane, as it sat there, probably waiting for take-off clearance, but in my heart I felt it was waiting to give us one last opportunity to say a final good-bye. And why not? After all, isn't love the strongest force in the universe? I stood and cried out to the plane, to the sky, and to all eternity, "Fly safely! Do you know what a precious cargo of love, faith, fulfillment, and miracles you carry?" My family! Almost immediately I heard a quiet, loving even familiar response coming, not only from the end of the runway but also from the depths of eternity: "I know; I know."

I'm not sure what being translated is like, but if it has anything to do with being removed from things physical and placed in a dimension or an understanding of things spiritual, including love, faith, family and eternity, then I can relate. All was quiet, very quiet. My heart or soul, or whatever I was made up of then, was throbbing in a synchronized pattern of love and gratitude that came from beyond myself.

The roar of engines shattered the quiet, and I watched that giant machine thunder down the runway. Faster and faster it went until it dipped briefly out of sight, only to reappear above the runway moving upward and onward into the soft Fijian sky. I watched

for a long time as it climbed higher and higher, then made a wide turn and headed back overhead on its way to America.

I focused on the blinking lights for as long as I could see them. Finally, even they melted into the night and I could no longer tell which was plane and which was star. As I struggled to distinguish between them, a peaceful realization came over me that it didn't really matter, for they were in the hands of God, and He was everywhere. The stars were His and they were His.

My heart, mind, and soul resonated to that simple thought. It seemed to fill my very being, as I saw and felt things that are sacred, true and eternal. I wrote a lot that night but I share only these brief phrases, which are neither prose nor poetry but rather a rush of feelings hastily put on paper.

To Jean

I watched you leave
That starlit eve
Through the soft Fijian sky.

You held our son
Our only son
With love and faith to try.

I watched you climb
And take your place
Among the stars above.

Please help me Jean
Build up my faith
Send me your warmth and love.

I strain to see
But cannot tell
Exactly where you are.

Yet God is there
And you are there
A brilliant shining star.

Oh Jean, my love
Please hold my heart

And touch my clouded eye.

Where are you Jean?
I need to know.
Please hear my lonely cry.

I want you here
I hurt so much
I need you by my side.

I search for you
But cannot see
Beyond the arching tide.

Yet what is that
So pure, so clear?
Oh Jean, I see, I see!

There you are!
That brilliant shining star.
So what is a star?

It's you and me
And our family
Through all Eternity

I Know.
I Know.
I know

That vision of the future potential of a family has never left me completely. I am convinced that once we see it clearly, we will never be the same.

I hope these experiences, demonstrating help from the past, the present and the future, have helped us understand the magnitude of eternal families as seen from God's perspective.

Let me show a final clip which, to me, summarizes all we have talked about. On my first mission we traveled from island to island by sailboat. Usually we got through storms safely. However, one particular storm was so furious that we were thrown from our boat. I remember thinking: "This isn't right. I'm a missionary. Where's my protection? Missionaries aren't supposed to swim." I learned that complaining doesn't help, only swimming does and I needed all my energy to swim. I tried to stay above water, but eventually my energy was gone. I never gave up, but at one point the strength in my arms and legs simply gave out.

As I went down for what could have been the last time a vision of Jean came into my mind. I felt her love and realized how much I loved her. I wanted to see her again. I wanted to marry her. I wanted her to be the mother of our children. The reality of the eternal nature of family became very clear to me even in this moment of despair. Suddenly I felt the power of Jean's love reaching down and pulling me up from the depths of that tumultuous sea.

Let's watch the artist's depiction of that event. Then I will conclude with my testimony.

Video Clip

Is there power in love? Is there power in family relationships? I testify there is. I testify that we can be influenced and strengthened by those who have gone before, by those who are with us now and by those who are yet to come. I know it is so.

As surely as the power of my great-grandmother's goodness could cross over 100 years of time and turn my fear to joy, as surely as the power of Jean's love could travel over 8000 miles and pull me up from the depths of death and despair into the light of life and future family, so surely can the power of the love of our ancestors, our spouses and our posterity reach across any physical barrier and influence us for good. Where true love is, barriers crumble.

Only the barrier of a hard heart, an unbelieving mind or a non-caring attitude can stop or delay these influences. How important it is to be humble and to open our hearts, our minds and our time to each other and to those on the other side of the veil.

I testify that love is the greatest power in the universe and that the greatest expression of that power and love comes in our families. The scriptures tell us that God is love. Since God is all powerful and since He is our Father in Heaven, love and family must be the essence of His power in the priesthood.

It is only as we see beyond the limits of this life that we understand the true meaning and importance of a family. The Proclamation to the World on the Family is as good a document as I know to explain this. I testify that if we are humble, work hard and are believing, all things over all time will work for our good.

Brother and sisters, I again commend you for all you do, and encourage you to do even more. We must do more to increase the effectiveness of our technology, but beyond

that we must do more to increase our deep feeling for and spiritual understanding of the eternal nature of families. I promise you that by living worthy of spiritual guidance, far greater things will happen to help our families, both descendants and ancestors, than all the technological advances this world will ever see. Of course, technology and spirituality can and must work together, but remember it is always the spirit that gives life.

I testify that God lives. He is our Father in Heaven. I testify that Jesus is the Christ, the only Begotten Son of the Father. He is our Redeemer and Savior. Jesus is the head of this His Church. The priesthood power to seal families on earth and in heaven is present in the Church today. I know that the temples we have are literally Houses of the Lord. Think of the physical meaning and spiritual significance of these word pairs: House and Family, Father and Son, Husband and Wife, Children and Parents, Time and Eternity.

I know Jesus lives and guides His Church through living prophets. I know that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is His Kingdom on earth today.

I know that Joseph Smith is the prophet who ushered in this final dispensation and that Gordon B. Hinckley is God's mouthpiece on the earth today. I know families are eternal and important, so important that the whole earth would be wasted were it not for worthily sealed families! Let's all do our part!

I have great confidence in you and leave my love and blessings with all of you. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.