



In Awe of Eternal Families

The doctrine of eternal families deserves more than familiarity; it should awaken gratitude, reverence, and hope.

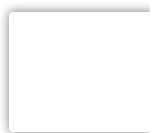
By Alan J. Hawkins

PROCLAMATION ON THE FAMILY

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I sometimes wonder if some Latter-day Saints—myself included—are a little too casual about [the truth of eternal families](#). Perhaps we are a little too *comfortable* with this doctrine, taking it for granted and rarely feeling the awe it should inspire. Is it possible that sometimes we are even under condemnation for treating this sacred doctrine [too lightly](#)?

“[The Family: A Proclamation to the World](#)” boldly articulates the [doctrine](#) that the family is an eternal and divine unit originating with a divine heritage:



Each [of us] is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. ... The divine plan of happiness enables family relationships to be perpetuated beyond the grave. Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for . . . families to be united eternally.

The fact that our families can be eternal, not just mortal, is one of God's greatest gifts to those who choose the covenant path. One reason for this is that difficult life circumstances, both historically and in the present, have often made it hard to fully realize our aspirations for our marital and family relationships in this life. Eternity can give us the "time" and "space" we lacked in mortality to build the deep and loving bonds we yearn for.

When Mortal Life Ends Too Soon

For most of human history, the specter of death haunted family relationships. The very act of bringing life into the world was fraught with mortal danger; the risk of death for women from multiple pregnancies was **much higher** than it is today. I see this phenomenon reflected in my own genealogical records. I have great-great-grandparents who lost each of their first four children within a few days of birth. The promise of eternal family relationships must be especially sweet to our ancestors who often had precious little time together in this mortal life.

But we don't have to comb through the pages of our genealogy to appreciate the eternal nature of family relationships. Some dear friends lost their sixth child at birth. Struggling with a difficult and dangerous twin pregnancy, Jessica (names have been changed) was bedridden and miserable for weeks and weeks. Each additional day that she could bear the misery of her pregnancy gave her unborn children a greater chance of enjoying a healthy life. Finally, one of the twins, Helen, was developed enough that she would likely survive, and both babies were delivered. Helen was healthy; little Hazel struggled for breath. The instant they were delivered, Jessica's husband, Justin, hushed the hectic delivery room and gave Hazel a name and a priesthood blessing. He then took

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Hazel to a waiting room so her anxious siblings and grandparents could meet her. Hazel died soon after. Even amid the joy of their healthy newborn Helen, their grief over Hazel was real. But the family's faith that she will be theirs again eternally has kept their brief memory of her sweet over the years.

And it's not just children who leave us early. My ancestor Lydia lost a beloved husband. After Lydia's conversion in the early days of the restored Church, [she met Newel Knight](#) in Kirtland, where he was laboring to build the temple. Lydia married Newel, and their marriage helped to bring her out of a deep depression from the early death of her first child and abandonment by her abusive first husband. Before leaving Nauvoo in that cold winter of 1846, Lydia and Newel were sealed as an eternal family in the half-finished Nauvoo Temple. But a year later, in Winter Quarters, Nebraska, Newel became deathly ill while living in a dugout hillside shelter. Lydia pleaded with the Lord to heal her beloved husband, as He had raised her from her deathbed on two previous occasions. But no miraculous healing was granted, and Newel begged Lydia to let him go. She relented, and Newel soon died, leaving Lydia, who was pregnant with their seventh child, and six children. The hope of an eternal reunion for Newel and Lydia after a mortal marriage cut short is another reason we can appreciate the gift that our families can continue in eternity.

These experiences remind me that I don't want family relationships to be reduced to memories. Memories are mechanisms to bridge the time until we can experience those relationships again, [coupled with eternal glory](#).

What Eternity Still May Repair

In my studies of the social history of families, the concept of romantic marriage, although *present* in many cultures throughout history, was not a pervasive [cultural expectation until the 19th century](#), when Lydia and Newel married. The conditions of marriage and family life throughout much of human history gave many couples little chance of becoming one as we understand it today. Will their eternal lives be a continuation of the relational austerity of their mortal circumstances? I don't think so. I sense that [beyond mortality](#) they will enjoy the blessing of building the warmth, affection, and oneness with one another that too often had to remain a distant priority in their mortal lives. As I perform proxy ordinance work on behalf of ancestors, I can

better appreciate what this work could mean to them, and how it can facilitate building exalted family relationships.

In more recent times, I think about my paternal grandparents. Their marriage was marked less by great intimacy and affection than by mutual respect and shared faith. Grandpa Hawkins was a confirmed bachelor in his late 30s when his sister died and left behind two orphaned daughters. He determined he needed to care for his orphaned nieces and decided that he must marry to do so properly. He sent a proposal letter to an acquaintance, Wilma Stolworthy, who lived in rural New Mexico. He had only met her briefly once or twice, but he admired her faith and hard work. Needless to say, Wilma was taken aback by this out-of-the-blue proposal. But being on the verge of being labeled an “old maid” at the age of 29, and knowing Willard to be an honest, hard-working, and faithful man, Wilma accepted the proposal and married Willard. Grandma Hawkins began married life caring for two children unrelated to her, and within four years their house was full of biological children and several other children from extended family who were in need of family care. She also came to understand that the man she married, although a good and God-fearing man, was rather anti-social. They struggled to build a warm relationship. Yet they raised a righteous posterity of children and related kin.

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I remember a comment my father made many years ago upon the death of my grandmother, a few years after my grandfather had passed away. He said he hoped they would now find the intimacy and warmth that eluded them in the difficult circumstances of their mortal life together.

In our modern times, too, life’s circumstances can make it difficult to become fully one in marriage. I have met spouses who, having discovered that they did not marry Prince or Princess Charming, **still choose** each day to treat each other as a person of divine heritage and destiny. Out of such actions come the blessings of heaven and deeper feelings of love. Mortality for us—and for our ancestors—is fragile and hard. Marriage is hard, too. I believe this is by design. Our greatest growth comes from gaining the Christlike virtues demanded by the intimacy and constancy of living with the imperfect

person we are bound to. I am grateful that we, like our ancestors, will have eternity to overcome imperfections and deepen our marital love. With such hope in mind, I don't want to be casual about my faith in eternal family relationships.

Binding the Generations

A few years ago, my wife, Lisa, and I went to the [temple](#) to seal her father to her mother and herself to both parents. Lisa's parents divorced when she was young, and she had a very strained relationship with her father. But Lisa was elated to do this temple work. She wasn't focused on her parents, however, who are unlikely to accept the marriage sealing ordinance offered to them. Instead, she was thrilled to complete the links of the chain of her family's generations, to be [linked](#) as an eternal family to her ancestors. As a convert to the faith, Lisa had, from her earliest years as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, faithfully devoted herself to family history research and temple work for as many of her ancestors as she could find. Now, she is connected to them in an eternal family unit. This has brought tangible joy to her soul.

A brief caveat as I conclude: I know that some feel ambivalent about eternal family relationships. Perhaps you have experienced neglect or serious abuse from a spouse, parent, or sibling, and you don't yearn for an eternal connection. I don't pretend that I have the perfect helping words to say. But maybe I can just offer this perspective. First, agency is an eternal, overriding doctrine. All family relationships in eternity will be [freely chosen](#). And I also believe that the healing powers of heaven are powerful and can bring sincere understanding, repentance, forgiveness, and healing, leading to an eternal, perfected love that is hard to achieve in our mortal lives.

Eternal family relationships are a beautiful truth of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Even in a time when fewer children die in infancy, and many married couples enjoy prosperous circumstances that facilitate intimacy, we can all be more grateful for the blessings of eternal family relationships and exalted love.



About the author

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