

## ***“Examples of Covenant Keepers in the Scriptures”***

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When we talk about covenants, we’re talking about family. When we talk about sisters and brothers as we meet here together in the Church, we’re talking about covenants that are made possible through the messenger of the covenant, Jesus Christ.

This past week I’ve learned a bit more about how real the connection between family and covenant is. My brother told me about this new program that they are trying in his ward where you can have your ward family history specialist log in as you and see what work has been done and what still needs to be done. So she logged in for my brother and dropped by their house to announce, “I can’t believe it. You’re right. It’s all done.” (No contribution from my part, I might add.)

At about the very same time that I learned that the saving ordinances for my ancestors back several generations have been completed, I received an email from a man named Albert in Canada who was reaching out to see if we are related. He found me because of my unique last name, Fronk, which was written “Vruggink” before my ancestors emigrated from Holland. So I became especially excited when I read that his mother was a Vruggink from the same city as my ancestors who left when they joined the Church. Albert also grew up in that same city in the Netherlands and remembers hearing his grandfather speak of a great-uncle who left their Dutch homeland in 1869 to come to Utah because of religion.

When Albert immigrated to Canada in 1964, his uncle made him promise to discover what happened to his grand-uncle’s descendants who had come to Utah. I like to imagine my great-great-grandfather in the spirit world talking with his older brother about how they’re going to get those kids of theirs talking to each other when they don’t know about each other at all. And somehow this distant cousin who is not a member of our faith got the message and reached out. Suddenly my family tree has expanded. In truth I can never say, “Checkoff, we’ve gone as far as we can go in family history.” There are people alive here on the earth right now who are part of that family. As a daughter of the covenant, I have promised to reach out and find ways to include and invite them to receive the same blessings. Of note, he reached out to me, not the other way around.

Another little exchange happened this week that has shaped my preparation for this session. An acquaintance approached me to comment that she saw my name listed for speaking at Women’s

Conference. She told me that she noted from the program that I was said to be a mother. She took exception to it by saying, "Are you really a mother?" because she knew I had married later in life and did not bear a child. Actually, I inherited two children when I married their father, and all I can tell you is that Emily and Dave are family. I call those two "our children," not "mine." I don't know how I could love them more if I had given birth to them. Perhaps we worry too much about what eternal families look like in the hereafter, and so we extrapolate too much about little details without understanding how God plans to work it out.

Anyway, these two experiences helped me see "family" more inclusively, broadly, and deeply, in light of the Lord's covenant with us. Why do we try to be so literal when ascribing family roles to others or to ourselves? We know that second marriages after death or divorce, and adoptions, whether they be formal or informal, are in virtually every family now. Family trees are rarely a simple diagram of birth parents and children. So if someone tries to warn you against adoption or marriage because it will "mess up the family tree," tell him or her to get over it.

Covenants bind people together in ways beyond what blood can do. This is the plan of our Father in Heaven. He wants all of us to come into the fold and be together. It was definitely the case of our forefathers and foremothers in the ancient world that we read about in the Bible. Rather than following a direct bloodline in the era of the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs, faith in Jehovah and His covenants constituted "family."

Covenants meant everything to Adam and Eve. Succinctly and clearly, Samuel the Lamanite explained the reason why: "All mankind, by the fall of Adam being cut off from the presence of the Lord, are considered as dead, both as to things temporal and to things spiritual."<sup>1</sup> Because of the Fall, humankind was considered dead to God. We like to sing "I Am a Child of God"<sup>2</sup> and with our Young Women stand and say, "We are daughters of our Heavenly Father, who loves us,"<sup>3</sup> which both make reference to our premortal relationship to the Father of our spirits. By doing a little research in scripture, however, you will find that humankind is more often called children of men, or children of Adam, rather than children of God. Specifically, we are called "children of men" or a related descriptor more than 270 times in scripture, and called "children of God" only 62 times, 56 of which refer to our ability to *become* the children of God, rather than to our being spirit offspring of the Father.

Let me illustrate. When King Benjamin's people felt "no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually,"<sup>4</sup> they were ready to make a covenant with the Lord and thereby *become* His spiritually adopted children. King Benjamin explained, "And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name."<sup>5</sup> That covenant was possible because of Jesus Christ and because of the people's hearts that changed through faith in Christ. Likewise, when we are baptized, we make a covenant to *become* part of God's family, as adopted children of Christ.

Note what we find in the Gospel of John: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to *become* the sons [and daughters] of God, even to them that believe on his name."<sup>6</sup> On condition of us receiving Him, the Redeemer grants us *power to become* his children. The Apostle Paul wrote, "God sent forth his Son, made of a woman . . . to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons [or sons and daughters]."<sup>7</sup> Paul testified that we could be "adopted" into God's family. He wrote something similar to the Romans: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons [and daughters] of God."<sup>8</sup> Do you notice the condition again? Because of the condition, we know

that this is not referring to our relationship with the Father in premortality. Paul continued, “Ye have received the spirit of adoption . . . And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.”<sup>9</sup> Notice that Paul is teaching of a relationship that surpasses us being children of Christ; we can be adopted to become “children of God.”<sup>10</sup> In the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith learned that through believing obedience we become *begotten* sons and daughters of God, or joint heirs with Christ.<sup>11</sup> These and multiple additional passages of scripture allude to adoption into God’s family through faith in Jesus Christ.

Because of the Fall, we are as dead, cut off, and need to be born again, or spiritually begotten. President Joseph F. Smith taught this same doctrine this way: “The object of our earthly existence is . . . that we may become the sons and daughters of God, in the fullest sense of the word, being heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ, to be kings and priests unto God, to inherit glory, dominion, exaltation, thrones, and every power and attribute developed and possessed by our Heavenly Father.” We become like Him as a result. “This is the object of our being on this earth.”<sup>12</sup>

Adam and Eve were the first to make that covenant and then teach it to their children. The covenant was then handed down from generation to generation and reestablished in Abraham’s day. Abraham desired to have the blessings of the fathers, not only for himself, but to give to others, to invite others to receive those unparalleled blessings. His own father was not one able to introduce these truths to him, so he had to seek elsewhere for them. Whom did he find to help him? Melchizedek.

As Jehovah made the covenant with Abraham, He explained what He promised to do for him and his family. “I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to put upon thee my name, even the Priesthood of thy father, and my power shall be over thee.”<sup>13</sup> From the Genesis account, we read, “I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.”<sup>14</sup>

Abraham’s wife, Sarah, was also included in the covenant, as were all who followed God’s word, which Jehovah made very clear when He changed her name. Isaiah knew that truth when he wrote, “Ye that follow after righteousness: . . . look unto the rock whence ye are hewn . . . Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you.”<sup>15</sup> Then Isaiah reiterated Jehovah’s promise: “For the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden.” Do you see the reversal that’s promised with the covenant? Where there was desert, it becomes Eden. “Her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.”<sup>16</sup> Or as Isaiah said it later, “beauty for ashes.”<sup>17</sup> So what is required of us? “Hearken unto me, my people, and give ear unto me, O my nation.”<sup>18</sup> His people, His nation, are therefore those who hearken, those who hear, and those that do what He commands.<sup>19</sup>

If you map out Abraham’s lineage, you find this is not an easy, simple, uncluttered family tree. I want to review part of that family tree. Abraham receives the covenant. He’s married to Sarah, who likewise makes the covenant, but Sarah is commanded by the Lord to also give Abraham another wife. So Abraham and Hagar have a son named Ishmael. When Ishmael is 13 years old, the Lord makes the covenant with him. Remember that Ishmael was circumcised, which is the sign of the covenant, as were all the other men that belonged to Abraham’s household.<sup>20</sup> When Hagar and Ishmael were later sent away, God did not forget them, part of what He promises in the covenant. He follows them and speaks to Hagar to give her a promise that Ishmael will be the father of a great nation<sup>21</sup> from 12 sons. I will return to Ishmael’s descendants in a minute; they are part of the covenant.

Meanwhile, back to Sarah and Abraham. In their old age they had a son, Isaac. And Isaac married Rebekah, and Isaac and Rebekah gave birth to the twins, Esau and Jacob. God spoke to Rebekah to inform her that the younger twin, Jacob, would be leader of the covenant in his generation, but Esau could also receive the covenant. Because Esau despised the covenant and the birthright, he married out of the covenant. After receiving his father's blessing to be the steward over the covenant, Jacob is sent away to go find himself a wife who would help him safeguard the covenant. Oh, he succeeds very well. You know, not just one, but why not four good wives? And they have 12 sons and at least one daughter.

Jacob's family forms the basis for what is called the nation of Israel. But that nation of Israel is not just those who are the direct lineage of these twelve tribes. Abraham later married a third wife, Keturah, who gave birth to six sons, one of whom was Midian.<sup>22</sup> One of Midian's descendants was Jethro, who ordained Moses with power and authority in the Holy Priesthood.<sup>23</sup> Moses was a descendant of Levi, Leah's third son by Jacob, and Jethro has a daughter Zipporah—and whom does she marry? Moses.<sup>24</sup> So clearly we now have Midianites in the family of Israel.

There will soon be Canaanites in the family tree, including Rahab the harlot.<sup>25</sup> She has a testimony of the Hebrew God, joins with the Israelites, and becomes an ancestress of Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup> Moabites are also in the Israelite family tree because we know about Ruth. There could have been other Moabites too, as well as many other peoples who joined with the people of Jehovah because they believed that He was the one true God.

But wait! There's more. Remember Esau? When he saw that his marrying out of the covenant disappointed his parents, he married a daughter of Ishmael.<sup>27</sup> If we haven't allowed Ishmael and Hagar to be blessed and enabled by God's covenant, the fact that Esau married one of his daughters could be insignificant. The descendants of the daughter of Ishmael and Esau are called the Edomites or the Idumeans in New Testament times. Talk about a complicated and "messy" family tree!

Included in Abraham and Sarah's family tree, I see evidence that more than the stewards or generational leaders of this covenant received the blessings of the covenant. Consider section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants: "Abraham received concubines, and they bore him children; and it was accounted unto him for righteousness"—can you see Hagar in there?—"because they were given unto him, and he abode in my law; as Isaac also and Jacob did none other things than that which they were commanded; and because they did none other things than that which they were commanded, they have entered into their exaltation, according to the promises, and sit upon thrones, and are not angels but are gods."<sup>28</sup> Do Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob become gods alone? Marriage is an essential part of the "new and everlasting covenant."<sup>29</sup> In other words, according to these revelations, if Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have been granted God's gift of exaltation, so have their wives.

Next, come with me to New Testament times where we find people who assume they have become children of God because they are direct descendants of Abraham. When some of the Jewish leaders said to Jesus, "Abraham is our father[,] Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham."<sup>30</sup> In essence, Jesus told them that being numbered in God's family is not necessarily connected to blood relationships but rather to obedience. The Doctrine and Covenants relays a great definition of what it means to be "the elect" of God according to the covenant. The elect are those who "hear my voice and harden not their hearts."<sup>31</sup> Isn't that good? That's what covenant keepers do.

Now let's look at one or two New Testament examples of covenant keepers. My favorite example of such is Mary, the mother of Jesus. Certainly she could talk about her blood relationship with Jesus and her royal lineage. She would pack the Marriott Center time and time again as the expert on what it means to be the family of God. But I don't think she would be touting her family tree. When the angel first visited her to announce that she would be the mother of the Son of God, she referred to herself as "the handmaid of the Lord," and then promised, "be it unto me according to thy word."<sup>32</sup> She committed her will to the will of God.

When she was carrying the Son of God and she met Elisabeth, and she discovered that Elisabeth knew through the Spirit that Mary was also with child, Mary sang this wonderful Magnificat: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. . . . And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation." She is singing of the covenant that endures from generation to generation. Mary continued, "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty away." Here we see signs of the covenant expressed as reversals again, like beauty for ashes. And then she sang, "He hath holpen . . ." The word translated by King James's scholars as "holpen" means more than "helped." It suggests taking by the hand, supporting, sustaining, and succoring. "He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; as he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed forever."<sup>33</sup> Yes, she sang of the promises of the covenant.

The Gospels later imply that Mary's other sons did not support Jesus and His ministry and would therefore not honor the covenant.<sup>34</sup> Once when Jesus was in Galilee, his mother and his brothers came to see him. The crowd notified Jesus that his family was among the multitude. They appeared to have expected that Jesus would ask them to give way, let them come up, because they have a special place as His family. But that isn't what happens. Instead, Jesus said, "My mother and my brethren are these which hear the word of God, and do it."<sup>35</sup> His family, the covenant people, are those who hear and do God's will.

Just a few chapters later in the Gospel of Luke, a woman of the company was likely thinking the same thing about Mary when she said to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that bare thee and the paps which thou hast sucked." In other words, blessed be your mother. She must be the most blessed of all. However, what does Jesus answer? "Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it."<sup>36</sup> He offered this woman the same explanation as He gave the multitude earlier. Obedience to God constitutes who are the children of God.

At the time of the Crucifixion when so many of the disciples scattered as sheep without a shepherd, being confused and offended,<sup>37</sup> we see Mary, the mother of Jesus, and a few other women are standing by the cross of Jesus.<sup>38</sup> We don't hear her voice in this scene, but her stance speaks volumes. If you want an image of what it means to "stand for truth and righteousness,"<sup>39</sup> look at Mary on this occasion. She doesn't care what people will think of her because of the shame associated with crucifixion. Without flinching, she stoically exemplifies the meaning of hearkening to the voice of the Lord by standing as a disciple, a covenant keeper, for her Savior.

I wish we knew more of these great women and men in the Bible, but we receive only this little glimpse. After the 40-day ministry of the resurrected Christ, some 120 saints came back to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles. Among those Saints were "women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, *and . . . his brethren*."<sup>40</sup> Without knowing the background story of Mary's younger sons, we glimpse evidence of the blessings of the covenant. Something happened to those brothers during those 40 days because they

are there, numbered with the other believers, as witnesses of the resurrection and divinity of Jesus Christ.

One quick look at a Book of Mormon example. You know about the faith that the stripling warriors learned from their mothers. But where did these mothers learn faith? They had made covenants with God when their hearts were changed to believe in Him. And once those mothers and fathers made covenants, they knew the truth and were firm, and they never turned away from it.<sup>41</sup>

So here's my conclusion, my friends—may I say, my family? I will summarize by listing four blessings that are manifest by covenant keepers in scripture that we may find in our own lives:

- 1) They recognize God's hand in their lives, day after day. Laman and Lemuel reacted to challenges in their day with sentiments such as, "Are you kidding? It's not fair. Why is this happening to me? Everyone else is back in Jerusalem having a wonderful time, and here I am with never-ending work to do. Why can't I be having fun back in Jerusalem?" Meanwhile, Nephi faced the same challenges with sentiments akin to, "Wow, check it out. We get to eat raw meat and it tastes sweet. When does that ever happen?" And if Nephi's saying that, I'll tell you who else is saying it even more: Sariah and the other women who no longer need to cook that meat. I can't help but think they were praising God for His hand in their lives.
- 2) They receive power to draw others to Christ and His covenant. Because there's a magnetism inherent in God's work, many will come to us and ask us for direction to find Him. Family is not restricted to blood lineage when we are speaking of the covenant.
- 3) They developed an awareness and love for eternal family. Blessed by the perfect love of Christ, we can see family wherever we look. With me today are three nieces who returned from missions during the last year. Through Christlike service, they discovered eternal family in Finland, in Alabama, and in the Philippines.
- 4) We become children of God, His family, by making and keeping His covenants. We stand as witnesses for Him at all times, and in all things, and in all places.<sup>42</sup> We find it a pleasure to serve Him and show compassion to those around us.

I pray that we may be true to what we have covenanted to do. May we pray for strength to harden not our hearts and hearken to His voice. May we remember Him who made it all possible. We are family. May we treat each other as such.

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1. Helaman 14:16.

2. *Children's Songbook*, 2.

3. Young Women Theme (<https://www.lds.org/young-women/personal-progress/young-women-theme?lang=eng>)

4. Mosiah 5:2.

5. Mosiah 5:7.

6. John 1:12; emphasis added.

7. Galatians 4:4–5.

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8. Romans 8:14.
  9. Romans 8:15–17.
  10. Romans 8:16.
  11. D&C 76:24.
  12. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* [1998], 100.
  13. Abraham 1:18.
  14. Genesis 17:7.
  15. Isaiah 51:1–2.
  16. Isaiah 51:3.
  17. Isaiah 61:3.
  18. Isaiah 51:4.
  18. See Isaiah 51:7.
  20. Genesis 17:23–27.
  21. Genesis 21:17–21.
  22. Genesis 25:1–4.
  23. D&C 84:6.
  24. Exodus 2:16–22.
  25. Joshua 2; 6:25.
  26. Matthew 1:5.
  27. Genesis 28:6–9.
  28. D&C 132:37.
  29. D&C 131:1–4.
  30. John 8:39.
  31. D&C 29:7.
  32. Luke 1:38.
  33. Luke 1:38, 46–55.
  34. See Mark 3:21 (“friends” here is better translated “those of his household”) and John 7:5.
  35. Luke 8:21.
  36. Luke 11:27–28.
  37. See Matthew 26:31.
  38. John 19:25.
  39. Ardeth G. Kapp, *Ensign*, Nov. 1988.
  40. Acts 1:14, emphasis added.
  41. Alma 23:6; 24:11–19; 53:16–22; 56:46–48.
  42. Mosiah 18:9.