

## **“His Most Precious and Enduring Creation”**

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Last year my husband surprised me by announcing that we were going to build a playhouse in our backyard. I had wanted a playhouse since I was a young girl and, as grandchildren began coming, I wanted one even more. I had dared not hope for such a luxury, so as soon as my husband told me of his plans, I knew immediately there was a very real possibility that this would be my Mother’s Day, anniversary, birthday, and Christmas present for the rest of my life. I was thrilled anyway.

Watching the development of the playhouse from an empty space on the ground to the finished product was an adventure for the entire family. During some stages of construction, the playhouse was much more attractive to our grandchildren than it was safe. At one point there were two openings from the second floor to the outside where slides would be attached, two little balconies, and the open stairwell connecting the top and bottom floors—all without railings or protection of any kind.

One day during that period I was tending two of my grandchildren: McKinnley, who was almost six years old, and his two-and-a-half-year-old sister, Kennedy. We were playing outside in the backyard when I remembered I needed to run into the house for a quick errand. I said to McKinnley, “Your sister is going to want to go up to the playhouse. I need you to watch her.” McKinnley is very good with younger children, and he readily agreed to my request. When I returned, probably only a minute later, McKinnley headed towards me from the direction of the playhouse with no Kennedy. Just then I heard her little voice call to me from the top of one of the small balconies of the playhouse, and there she was, teetering on the edge, waving and blowing kisses. Directly below her was a cement slab, which was soon to become the front porch, and to the side were several large boulders.

I ran as fast as I could to the playhouse, up the stairs, and snatched that little girl into my arms. McKinnley was right behind me. As I sat down with her, breathless on the floor, he gently put his hand on my shoulder and said, “You didn’t have to worry, Grandma. Before I left Kennedy up here, I showed her all the holes not to fall through.”

I can picture our Father in Heaven, preparing us for our transition to this earth, with all of us promising Him that we would look out for our brothers and sisters here. Because of our varying maturity and limited perspectives, He must have known that we wouldn’t always get it just right. And yet, He apparently had confidence in us and trusted that we will get His work done.

The Lord has told us, as recorded in the book of Moses, that “this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). His work and His glory is to bring His children back home, and He has enlisted all of us, assigned to family units, to help in that process. There is nothing more important to the Lord than having His children return to His presence. As creator, He could structure our environment and opportunities here any way He chose, and we must assume that His plan was designed to give each of us the greatest opportunity for success, as He views success. As imperfect as most of our families are, families must be where and how we are most likely to have experiences that will prepare us for eternal life. Perhaps this is why Elder Marion G. Romney referred to the family as “[The Lord’s] most precious and enduring creation.”

The enduring quality of families is something that each of us, as members of the Church, is taught from our earliest years. We learn such songs as “Families Can Be Together Forever,”<sup>2</sup> and we talk about the importance of temple marriage so that our families can be sealed together for time and eternity. For many this is a comforting thought, even during those moments when precious may not be the first descriptor which comes to mind during some of our particular family interactions. But for others, neither enduring nor precious seems to be a word which will ever fit our family circumstances, and we can wonder why the Lord would place us in such difficult situations when others around us seem to have every advantage of life and opportunity for success.

This is a fair question to ask, but one for which I have no answer. What I do know is that there is order and purpose to our experience here, although as we live out the details of our existence the unfolding picture is sometimes difficult, and perhaps even impossible to accurately see from our limited vantage point. President Gordon B. Hinckley has admonished us to “never lose sight of the fact that the Lord put you where you are according to His design, which you don’t fully understand.”<sup>3</sup> He placed us in families that we might help each other, learn from each other, draw strength from each other in times of need, and grow in our understanding of the gospel—together. His promise to us is clear: “Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord,” which is “the rest of the Lord” (Matthew 25:21; Moroni 7:3).

Wouldn’t it be nice if we really could comprehend how all of that works? Haven’t we all wished from time to time to be able to see the end from the beginning, to understand how all the pieces fit together? Sometimes we don’t even have all the pieces, let alone know how they fit together. The Lord’s way is not to show us the end but to show us the way. That’s important to understand. Just because we can’t see it, however, doesn’t mean there is not a beautifully designed and intricate masterpiece of which we are a part.

Sister Patricia Holland, comparing our earthly experience to a tapestry, suggests that “our heavenly parents are preparing a lovely tapestry with exquisite colors and patterns and hues. They are doing so lovingly and carefully and masterfully. . . . It is very difficult for us to assess our own contribution accurately . . .

“ . . . We are confined to the limited view of the underside of the tapestry where things can seem particularly jumbled and muddled and unclear. If nothing really makes very much sense from that point of view, it is because we are still in process and unfinished. But our

heavenly parents have the view from the top, and one day we will know what they know—that every part of the artistic whole is equal in importance and balance and beauty. They know our purpose and potential, and they have given us the perfect chance to make the perfect contribution in this divine design.” 4

Elder Jeffrey Holland makes the same point using a different metaphor. He compares our life experience to that of being in the scene of a play. “We—never seeing the play from the outside, and meeting only the tiny minority of characters who are on stage in the same scenes as we, and largely ignorant of the future and very imperfectly informed about the past—cannot tell at what moment Christ will come and confront us.” He continues, “Playing it well, then, is what matters most.” 5

Let me show you an example. As you look at the screen before you, what do you see? [Closeup of a Bloch painting is displayed.] At first glance it may seem dark, uninviting and without form or design. But as the camera is moved back some distance, allowing us to gain a grander perspective, a masterpiece unfolds which touches our hearts with a reverence for all it represents. This painting, commissioned by Danish priests in 1883, was created by artist Carl Bloch to celebrate the opening of the Bethesda Indre Mission in Copenhagen. It hung there as a focal point until August 29, 2001, at which time it was transported to the BYU Museum of Art, where it is now displayed in a place of prominence. The scriptural account portrayed here is of Christ healing the sick at the pool of Bethesda (John 5: 2–9), and it powerfully portrays a message of love, hope, and physical and spiritual healing. Isn't it interesting that when we are very close to something, even as exquisite as this work of art, its appearance can be very unappealing? Just as moving slightly away from it changed its meaning for us, the dark and dreary corners of our lives, if seen from some distance, can be understood as essential parts of the Lord's masterpiece for us. We need to look for the Savior's hand in our lives. Just as He is lifting the cover from the crippled man in the painting, He invites us to come to Him and be healed from our cares.

It is not an easy task to see our own experience with the meaning the Lord has for them. Our lives are so busy, and demands on our time are so tremendous. But there is a sure way, as Elder Neal A. Maxwell tells us: “Because looking at life and others through the lens of the gospel provides eternal perspective, if we look long enough, as well as often enough, we can see much more clearly. . . . Such things as a mess of pottage and thirty pieces of silver and moments of sensual pleasure totally disappear from view; so does an improved golf swing or tennis serve when compared with progress towards patience. So does redecorating the front room when placed alongside listening to and teaching one's children.” 6

It is impossible to overstate the value of the gospel in our lives. As we look through its lens, as Elder Maxwell suggests, we are able to catch a glimpse of the magnificence of the Lord's creations. We understand how precious each one of our Heavenly Father's children is to Him and that each has a place of importance in His grand design. We feel His love for us and the love He wants us to share with those around us. I am reminded of a mother of a large family who was asked which one of her children was her favorite. Her answer was quick and telling: “The one who is sick, the one with a problem, the one who needs me most

today.”

Our vision of possibilities and potential is sharpened when we are reminded that with God, nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37). Nor is anything inconsequential. Each of us matters to Him: our happiness, our potential, our problems, our progress back home to His presence. Keeping focused on the things of most importance, being able to filter out the detractors of the world, and holding steady the gospel lens to our eye—all facilitate our staying the course as we journey along the sometimes treacherous roads of life.

But remember, this is not a solitary journey. Although we will stand before God as individuals to be judged, we do not progress to that point alone, nor will we live in the eternities alone. Tessa Santiago, in a talk to the BYU community in 1997, recounted the experience of thirteen-year-old Mary Goble Pay, an ancestor of Sister Marjorie Hinckley. Mary and her family were fortunate enough to have an ox-drawn wagon as they began their trek across the plains to the Salt Lake Valley. Ox wagons could go faster, carry more supplies, and were much easier on the travelers who could sometimes ride than were the handcarts used by so many of the Saints who had much less than Mary’s family. Mary later wrote in her journal, “We had orders not to pass the handcart companies. We had to keep close to them to help them if we could.” The slower journey and ensuing bitter winter conditions exacted its toll on her family, just as it did on all the others in those companies. Mary’s six-week-old baby sister and older brother were both buried along the way. Her forty-three-year-old mother died just before their wagon entered the Valley. In spite of the tremendous sacrifices, her family understood their responsibility to their brothers and sisters and they did not desert them, even though it would have appeared to have been in their own best interests to have done so. As Sister Santiago reflected, “As long as there are others on the trail, or those who might travel with us, our stewardship is not over.”<sup>7</sup>

I am struck by the importance of working and loving and struggling together as I reflect on another group of people who successfully journeyed to Zion, another Zion—the city of Enoch, the only city in recorded history which has ever been translated. This is indeed an amazing account, when we remember that at the time of Enoch’s calling from the Lord, a large number of people were wicked and Enoch, righteous and capable as he was, felt somewhat reluctant to accept the daunting assignment of helping them turn their hearts to the Lord. “Why have I found favor?” he asks. “I am but a lad and all the people hate me” (Moses 6:31). Enoch was not being overly modest. In truth, he was inexperienced, and the people really did not want to listen to him. Does this sound at all familiar? The very same avenue Enoch used then is open to each of us today, and it’s really quite simple. He trusted that the Lord would help him.

We are given little information about how this transformation from wickedness to righteousness and from reluctance to apparent perfection took place, but one verse gives us some insight into the process which evolved. We learn that the people of Enoch “were of one heart and one mind . . . and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). Being of one heart and one mind suggests an openness, a nonjudgmental and selfless attitude of reaching out and of cooperation. “No poor among them” is not a reference primarily to money. I believe that every member of that extended family shared all they had with each other so

that there were no poor emotionally, physically, intellectually, and most important, spiritually. For these people, the success of the entire group must have been highly valued over an extended period of time, and that required not only willing givers but willing recipients as well. It was the city of Enoch, not the individual of Enoch, that the Lord chose to bring to Him in this special way. If the people of Enoch had gathered at the pool of Bethesda, they would not have been clumped together, each one hoping to be the first into the pool. They would have joined hands, supporting those in need, and dipped down into the water together.

The scriptures are rich with messages which continue with an almost uncanny relevance today, centuries and millennia since they were written. It seems that the perennial nature of family relationships transcends time and place, regardless of the variables. Husbands, wives, parents, siblings, and in-laws apparently all shared many of the same feelings in 600 B.C. in the Middle East as they do in A.D. 2002 in Provo, Utah. It is likely no coincidence, then, that the very first stories in both the Book of Mormon and the Bible are about families. The first words of the Book of Mormon remind us of the significance of families, "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents . . ." (1 Ne. 1:1).

As I reflect upon what we know of Adam and Eve, two of the Lord's choicest spirits, and then again on Lehi, a prophet of God, and his devoted wife, Sariah, I am reminded that even these most righteous of parents experienced significant family challenges. Because family is what matters most, because it is the Lord's most precious and enduring creation, it should not be surprising to us that this is precisely where the adversary is waging his fiercest attack. If it were not of such importance, Satan and his comrades would focus their efforts elsewhere. This should not be cause for us to fear but rather an incentive to hold tightly to what we know to be good and true, to be alert to the cunningness and deceptions of the adversary, to see through the confusion of the messages of the world.

The messages of the world demean the family and give little assistance to the work within the walls of our homes. All this can feel overwhelming and, even though our hearts may be in the right place, it can be difficult to know where to start and how to, as President Hinckley has said, "Carry on." 8

Ironic as this may sound, we can be strengthened by acknowledging our inadequacies and using that understanding to direct us to the Lord. A few weeks ago, I mentioned in a campus meeting with a group of colleagues that it was very apparent to me why each of them had been appointed to their respective positions of responsibility, but I sometimes wondered and worried about how a regular girl like me had ended up in a place like this. Later, much to my surprise, a friend who was in that meeting said he often feels that same way as well. We probably all have situations when we just do not think we are equal to the task and, if we believe we have to handle everything on our own, we are probably correct. I believe that even the brightest, most talented, creative, beautiful people in the world have those times when they wish they could do better. Part of the Lord's plan is to provide us with opportunities that will test our limits, cause us to try a little harder, and in the process become acutely aware of our dependence on Him as we gain new skills. Nothing can provide us with the continuous and dramatic opportunities for testing and growth as much as

our family relationships. Each time we turn to the Lord for strength and refuse to give in to Satan's enticements to be discouraged or to give up, we learn a little more, and we strengthen the very bonds which have eternal implications.

The world would have us believe that if we have problems, particularly when they do not seem to be of our own creation, we abandon the situation and look elsewhere for satisfaction; that if a situation is hard, we walk away. We are tricked into thinking that we are entitled to constant pleasure and that our needs should be met. Clearly, we live in a drive-through society. Of course that sounds appealing, but in the end it's not how we achieve a sense of personal achievement and satisfaction, and it is not a perspective that allows us to have an impact on those around us. The Lord uses words in the scriptures that remind us to be patient when He says, ". . . that [we] might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:25). Oh, if only we could always remember that it is not the perfect, trouble-free moments of life we should focus on but who is at our side. As Paul said in a letter to the Romans, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

The real message here is to trust the Lord and to never give up. Again, Paul counseled us to "hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). The family, during its phases of near perfection and complete imperfection, is ordained of God and is good. <sup>9</sup>We must remind ourselves that we knew each other before and we rejoiced at the opportunity to be here together. Sometimes that is very easy to forget.

How can we know what to do next? How can we know when to stop doing something that is not working and to try a new strategy? Alma told his people to "counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good" (Alma 37:37). It's such an obvious answer, but sometimes we think of prayer as a last resort instead of a first resort. "Because our Father loves His children," Elder Eyring has told us, "he will not leave us to guess about what matters most in this life concerning where our attention could bring happiness or our indifference bring sadness." Elder Eyring goes on to say, "We may have to pray with faith to know what we are to do, and . . . we must pray with a determination to obey. But we can know what to do and be sure that the way has been prepared for us by the Lord." <sup>10</sup>

I think our experience on earth is like the playhouse in my backyard. It's not too far from the "big" house, so the parents can keep an eye on their little ones and hear their confident calls "Look at me" as they zip down the slide. Sometimes, the voice is a little more plaintive as a younger one hollers for help—the top of the slide looking down is much more daunting than the bottom looking up. The playhouse is a place where the children can practice independence and have picnic lunches, a place where they can learn to obey the rules. It's a place they can learn to get along, to share, to get sand out of each other's hair and let everyone into the club, no matter how old they are. At the end of the day, the kids come back and we are together—as a family.

Elder Robert D. Hales has emphasized: "We are each an important and integral part of a family and the highest blessings can be received only within an eternal family. When families are functioning as designed by God, the relationships found therein are the most

valued of mortality. The plan of the Father is that family love and companionship will continue into the eternities. Being one in a family carries a great responsibility of caring, loving, lifting, and strengthening each member of the family so that all can righteously endure to the end in mortality and dwell together throughout eternity. It is not enough just to save ourselves. It is equally important that parents, brothers, and sisters are saved in our families. If we return home alone to our Father in Heaven, we will be asked, ‘Where is the rest of the family?’ This is why we teach that families are forever. The eternal nature of an individual becomes the eternal nature of the family.”<sup>11</sup>

This can seem like a tall order. President Kimball, sensitive to the feelings of discouragement some of us may have as we try hard and still see loved ones who are not progressing as we would hope, said, “Where there are challenges [with family members], you fail only if you fail to keep trying!”<sup>12</sup> It is my prayer that we will not give up, that we can remember we are on the Lord’s errand as we play our part with His most precious and enduring creation, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marion G. Romney, “Scriptures As They Relate to Family Stability,” *Ensign*, February 1972, 57.

<sup>2</sup> “Families Can Be Together Forever,” *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: 1985), no. 300.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon B. Hinckley, *Stand a Little Taller: Counsel and Inspiration for Each Day of the Year* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey R. Holland and Patricia T. Holland, *On Earth As It Is in Heaven* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 4–5.

<sup>5</sup> Holland and Holland, *On Earth As It Is in Heaven*, 137.

<sup>6</sup> Neal A. Maxwell, *We Will Prove Them Herewith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 76.

<sup>7</sup> Tessa Meyer Santiago, “Under Covenant toward the Promised Land: Section 136 as a Latter-day Saint Type,” *Brigham Young University Speeches, 1996–97* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), 239–49; emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Gordon B. Hinckley, *The Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 255.

<sup>9</sup> “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Henry B. Eyring, “The Family,” *Ensign*, February 1998, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Robert D. Hales, “The Eternal Family,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, “Families Can Be Eternal,” *Ensign*, November 1980, 5.

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