

# *The Value of a Good Name*

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*L. Tom Perry was a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional talk was given at Brigham Young University on 11 February 1997.*

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We experienced a special day in our family on January 4, 1997. My brother organized a party honoring the 200th birthday of Gustavus Adolphus Perry. I am certain we were the only family holding a party for one born 200 years ago. Gustavus Perry was an important member of our family tree. He was baptized in 1832 and became the first of our family to embrace the gospel. The Perry family history records this remarkable event:

*On a beautiful farm in the state of New York, Gustavus Adolphus Perry and his good wife, Eunice Wing, with their three sons, Orrin Alonzo, Lorenzo, and Henry Elisha, and their four daughters, Rosalie Alvira, Alvina, Amanda, and Lucy, were living very peacefully and happily. Close to the year of 1830 (we do not know the exact date) one evening after a light snow had fallen, the family was all in for the night. It was dark and the latchstring was drawn in so no one could enter the house. Then suddenly without warning, a stranger walked into the home and greeted them with these words: "God bless you." He spent the night with them explaining the principles of the gospel and told them of a new book called the Book of Mormon and quoted passages from the same. He then told them on what pages they were to find the quotations and that elders would soon visit them. The messenger disappeared in the morning just as suddenly as he had appeared the night before, leaving no tracks in the freshly fallen snow. They inquired of their neighbors to see if anyone had seen him. They had not, and no trace of him could be found.*

This good family was ready for the gospel when it came to them, and they joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1832.

The Perrys were like other families who joined the Church in the early 1800s. They moved from their home in upstate New York to Ohio, then on to the gathering in Missouri. Forced from their Missouri home, they moved to Illinois. Again driven from their home, in the very cold winter of 1846, they made the painful trip across Iowa to settle in the Lake Branch at Winter Quarters. Here Gustavus served as a counselor in the bishopric until they were instructed in 1852 by Brigham Young to close the ward, join a wagon train, and make the long trek across the plains. Upon their arrival in Utah, he moved his family north into Box Elder County and settled at Three Mile Creek. In a few years his son, Orrin Alonzo, became the first bishop, and, as was the custom in those days, the community was named after their first bishop--thus, Perry, Utah, was named.

My brother thought that the birthday of Gustavus Adolphus Perry was significant and that we should all remember and honor the first member of our family to join the Church. As a part of the birthday celebration, my brother spent last year searching for the descendants of Gustavus Adolphus Perry. We were amazed at the record he had on the table before us as we celebrated. He had found more than 10,000 descendants of this good man. The number overwhelmed me. I could not believe that there could be more than 10,000 descendants of Gustavus Adolphus Perry, the first member of our family to join the Church. Suddenly I realized the value of a good name. In seven to eight generations, his family had sufficient numbers to organize three stakes of Zion.

In 1997, as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of those who made the great trek across the plains to find freedom to worship according to their beliefs, it seems appropriate that we take time to remember those who did so much for us to bring the gospel into our families. First, each of us has these special accounts in our family histories of the sacrifices that were made for us to be blessed with a knowledge of the gospel. In some families, you may be the first member to join. You become its pioneer family. Therefore you have the obligation to record in your history who brought the converting power of the gospel to you.

I thought this morning, as we approach this year of celebration, we should pause to consider the value of a good name. A study of the scriptures certainly demonstrates the importance the Lord places on a name and the value it can have for succeeding generations. The most exciting example I can think of is contained in Genesis 17:

*And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.*

*And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying,*

*As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations.*

*Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.*

*And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.*

*And 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. [Genesis 17:27]*

The same promise was given to Abraham's son, Isaac. When his wife, Rebecca, had no children, Isaac entreated the Lord in her behalf. She was blessed of the Lord and gave birth to twins, Esau and Jacob. Esau was a hunter, an outdoorsman. The scriptures describe Jacob as a plain man who dwelled in a tent. Esau, in desperation, after coming in hungry from a hunting expedition, entreated Jacob to give him some food. He sold his birthright to Jacob for the food that he obtained. Later Jacob was blessed by his father "to have dominion and rule over peoples and nations" (Genesis 27, introduction). The blessing that Jacob received angered Esau when he found out that his father could not give two birthright blessings. He became so incensed that it was necessary for Jacob to flee because Esau desired his life. En route to the home of his mother's brother, the blessing that was promised to Abraham and Isaac was given to Jacob. Here is that blessing:

*Thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. [Genesis 28:14]*

When Jacob arrived at his uncle's place, he met Rachel tending her father's sheep. He assisted her in watering the flock. The scriptures record that she was a beautiful maid, and Jacob loved Rachel. Arrangements were made for their marriage. He was required to work seven years to receive her hand. At the end of seven years he approached his mother's brother for the wedding to take place. Jacob was informed that it was the custom in their land for the first daughter to be married before the second. He was required to marry Leah, the older sister. At the end of the seven days of wedding feasts, he was allowed to marry Rachel, but he had to work another seven years to fulfill his indebtedness. Jacob's marriages blessed him with 12 sons.

Great sorrow came to Jacob when Rachel died after giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. Added to his burden was the resentment of the brothers toward Joseph, for Jacob loved Joseph more than all his children. The brothers' feelings turned to hatred, and when the opportunity presented itself, the older brothers sold Joseph as a slave. He was then carried into Egypt.

The Lord blessed Joseph, and he prospered in the land of the pharaoh. When Jacob and his family fell on hard times, the older sons had to travel to Egypt to find relief from the famine. This led to a reunion and a great reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. He told them: "And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance" (Genesis 45:7).

Later, under the direction of the Lord, Jacob and all the souls of his house, numbering 70, moved to Egypt. Jacob was overjoyed to see Joseph again.

The honor given Jacob was that the Lord caused that his name be changed to Israel--"one who prevails with God."

*And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel.*

*And God said unto him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins;*

*And the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land. [Genesis 35:10-12]*

Later, as the time drew near for Jacob (or Israel) to die, he called his sons together to bless them and their seed.

Israel's posterity were blessed in many ways, each receiving an inheritance in the land as they returned from Egypt.

Reuben and Simeon, because of their unrighteousness, were passed over in the special blessings given by Israel to his sons. To the third son, Levi, was given the priesthood. To Judah was given a blessing that through his posterity would come the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords.

Judah was the natural leader among the sons of Jacob, and the tribe descending from him took the lead after they settled in Israel.

The gospel of Matthew records the kingly lines of Jesus, the Messiah:

*The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

*Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren.* [Matthew 1:1-2]

Then the scriptures continue on down through the generations to be certain that these tied into that kingly rule of David: "And Jesse begat David the king; and David the king begat Solomon" (Matthew 1:6). Then, a little further down: "And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:16).

Christ's genealogical record tied into the prophecies of the Old Testament that the Savior would come through the tribe of Judah through David, the king, thus certifying his legal right to be the chosen Messiah, for this is the line that had been predicted by the prophets of old. "Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise: thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies; thy father's children shall bow down before thee" (Genesis 49:8).

It was to Joseph, the firstborn of Rachel, Israel's second wife, that the birthright blessing was given: "Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall" (Genesis 49:22).

Joseph's blessings were passed on to his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Thus, from the name of Israel came the great promise passed on from Abraham to Isaac to Israel and on to the numerous descendants who would be scattered in many lands.

Thus we see the kingly rule being promised through Israel's son Judah. To Joseph the blessing was given that his descendants would spread unto the utmost bounds of the everlasting hills. This blessing would extend into the latter days, when one named Joseph would be called to bring about a restoration of the fullness of the gospel.

It has always been interesting to me that the Prophet Joseph Smith was the third son of Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith. He had two older brothers, yet the name of Joseph was preserved for him. Who could doubt that his life was the fulfillment of the great promise made to Joseph of old that through his lineage would come that great saving power of the gospel of our Lord and Savior.

Let us just look briefly at the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith and how that promise was literally fulfilled.

Few prophets have come from more humble beginnings than those of the Prophet Joseph Smith. He was the fifth child in a family of 11. The rugged, rocky soil of New England had not been good to his family. The climate limited the growing season. During Joseph Smith's early years, his family moved frequently, trying to find fertile soil for a suitable livelihood. They moved from Sharon to Tunbridge, then on to Royalton, Vermont. In 1811 they moved to the small community of West Lebanon, New Hampshire, and began, as his mother said, "to contemplate, with joy and satisfaction, the prosperity which had attended our recent exertions" (Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958], p. 51). But typhoid fever came to West Lebanon in a terrible epidemic. The epidemic swept through the upper Connecticut valley and left 6,000 people dead. One by one the Smith children fell ill. It was then that Joseph had the illness and accompanying complications that eventually required surgery. The Lord again showed his hand by providing one of the few surgeons who could perform the delicate operation that saved Joseph's life and prepared him for the future that was ahead.

Many illnesses left the Smith family destitute, and they had to move again, this time to Norwich, Vermont. Here the Smith family began to farm and attempt to wrest a livelihood out of the difficult Vermont soil. Crops failed three years in a row, prompting the father to again look for a place where

he could provide for his family. He heard of land in upstate New York that had promise. He took what resources he had to pay off his debts and left his family and went on to New York to explore the possibility of moving his family there. Once again we see the hand of the Lord in guiding them to the proper destination where great events in Church history would take place. It was in this location that the family settled down and the remarkable events occurred that brought forth the restoration of the gospel.

Out of this hard, difficult beginning, Joseph Smith developed a great reliance on the Lord, trusting in him to gain the exceptional spiritual strength needed so that he could be used by the Lord to organize his church again on the earth. To organize the work to begin this dispensation, the Lord needed a pure spirit, unlearned in the things of the world. He had to have one who could be taught by the ministration of angels. There was no earthly teacher equipped to do this training. The would-be prophet had to be truly sensitive to the Spirit, a quick learner, and a young man of exceedingly great faith--faith enough to approach the Lord after being impressed by reading James 1:5, which reads, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."

This inspired the young man. He took courage and went into a grove of trees and there asked God to give him the wisdom he was seeking. The great, humble petition of this simple young man brought forth a remarkable change in the thinking of mankind toward the very nature of God. It was the beginning of a whole series of events that occurred in Joseph's young life. Carefully taught by messengers from on high, he had the great privilege of bringing forth the Book of Mormon, and through miraculous means it was translated and made available to the peoples of the world--another witness for our Lord and Savior on the earth to eliminate the great confusion that was developing among religious sects, even about the very basics of the gospel. He was the first elder and was called to be the instrument of the Lord to effect the restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ again on earth.

The prophet's life was all too short, but the contribution he made will last into the eternities. His life was taken from him by a cruel mob on the 27th day of June of 1844. He had fulfilled the prophecy. Joseph, son of Joseph, as had been prophesied in the scriptures, had brought forth the remarkable work in these, the latter days. Thus we see how the Lord has fulfilled his promise to Abraham's seed. (See *Church History in the Fulness of Times* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989], pp. 2027.)

The name we have been given is special because it blesses us with a heritage by which we can receive the great promise of the Lord to his children, even the gift of life eternal. It has always been of profound interest to me that the first lesson taught to the Prophet Joseph Smith by Moroni was the absolute necessity of families being sealed together. That message was recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 2:

*Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.*

*And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers.*

*If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming. [D&C 2:13]*

The purpose of Elijah's mission was the restoration of the sealing power to bind on earth that which will be bound in the eternities to come, thus making operative on earth the ability to perform the ordinances of the gospel for both the living and the dead. This made it possible for the eternal linking of families together.

I have always marveled how the Spirit of Elijah works on men and women when they understand the blessings of an eternal unit. It even spreads to those who do not understand this doctrine. Genealogy, they tell me, has become the number-one hobby in the nation. The Spirit of Elijah almost becomes a contagion among the people as it moves to unite family units together. Look at the wide acceptance of PBS and the number of stations carrying the program *Ancestors* that was produced here at Brigham Young University. In the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* we find an explanation:

*When Latter-day Saints speak of the spirit of Elijah . . . , they mean at least two things. First, the promise of salvation made to the fathers has been renewed to the modern Church. . . . Second, the hearts of men and women have extensively turned to their fathers, as is evident in the dramatic growth in the number of genealogical societies, libraries, and individual genealogical or family history research organizations throughout much of the world. . . .*

*For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the spirit of Elijah is the spirit of family kinship and unity. It is the spirit that motivates the concern to search out ancestral family members through family history; and, on their behalf, to perform proxy baptisms, temple endowments, and sealing ordinances (HC 6:252). This is seen as fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi that in the last days Elijah "will turn the heart . . . of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:56). [Encyclopedia of Mormonism, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 45152; s.v. "Elijah" and "Elijah, Spirit of"]*

As we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Mormon pioneers after they struggled over the plains from Winter Quarters to the Salt Lake Valley, it is only natural that our thoughts are turned to the history of our families and the sacrifices they made to embrace the gospel of our Lord and Savior. In 1966 the Church announced a priesthood genealogy program and counseled members in this way:

*The family books of remembrance in Latter-day Saint homes today should rate in importance second only to the standard works. These family records are supplements to the scriptures, aiding in teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to the posterity of faithful members of the Church. A knowledge of the written testimonies and spiritual experiences of family members and of the proved genealogies of the fathers serves to bind the hearts of the children to their fathers and helps them to understand the doctrines that pertain to the exaltation of the family. . . .*

*Every faithful family should be diligently compiling a book of remembrance. In it should be found the story of the family, especially the story of its spiritual life, written by inspiration. It should also contain a genealogy of the family so that the children may have an opportunity to acquire knowledge of their fathers. ["Genealogy: The Book of Remembrance," *Improvement Era* 69, no. 4 (April 1966): 29495]*

In addition, President Spencer W. Kimball taught about the personal benefit of keeping a book of remembrance. He said:

*Keeping journals reminds us of blessings. Those who keep a book of remembrance are more likely to keep the Lord in remembrance in their daily lives. Journals are a way of counting our blessings and of leaving an inventory of these blessings for our posterity. [TSWK, p. 349]*

As I have studied the history of my family and have learned how much they sacrificed for the gospel, I have grown to appreciate the value of a good name. It has built within me a greater desire to do what I can do to bring honor to this good family name. It has also impressed upon me the responsibility I have to future generations. If I were to bring dishonor to the name, and if our family continues to grow

as it has in the past generations, that influence could cause many to fall away, thus limiting their eternal blessings.

In Proverbs we find that "a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold" (Proverbs 22:1).

We cannot isolate ourselves from those around us. Our good name can be a special valued asset worth more than the riches of the world.

In the Lord's grand design for his children, he placed families as a centerpiece of his organizational structure. The scriptures always have their beginning in a family setting. In the Old Testament we have the story of Adam and Eve. The New Testament begins with the genealogy of our Savior. The Book of Mormon's first lines are "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents." Near the beginning of the Doctrine and Covenants is an excerpt from Moroni's visit to Joseph Smith reminding us of the visitation of Elijah the prophet (D&C 2). In the Pearl of Great Price, again, is told the story of our first earthly parents.

Your good name connects you with your past family history. Your righteous living, your example, your teachings, and your worthwhile service will bless numerous people with your vision. It is almost impossible to comprehend the number. May the Lord bless you with a greater understanding of his great plan of happiness and your special role in it. I add my witness to the many who have stood in this place over many years that families are important. Your name is special. It is recorded in the histories of our Father in Heaven, and how you value that, how you treat it, will literally affect generations to come. God bless you with the vision that is yours of who you are and the great privilege that is yours to belong to the Church of Jesus Christ.

God lives and Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world. We are part of that great plan that he has laid out for us for our eternal glory. This is my witness to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, even Jesus Christ. Amen.