

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT FAMILY HISTORY

The Prophet Joseph Smith Said: “The greatest responsibility in the world that God has laid upon us is to seek after our dead.”¹

Note: As you read these quotes, pay close attention to a prophet quoting another prophet “. . . and would therefore be a second witness and sometimes even a third.”²

THE PURE DOCTRINE OF REDEEMING THE DEAD

What is family history work?

“In the Church, doing family history work means identifying your ancestors and providing temple ordinances for them. This is not a one-time service. You should participate in some aspect of this work throughout your life.”³

Why do we do family history?

“In this Church we are not hobbyists in genealogy work. We do family history work in order to provide the ordinances of salvation for the living and the dead.”⁴

What is the Spirit of Elijah?

The Spirit of Elijah is the Holy Ghost bearing witness that the family is eternal.⁵

“In 1844, Joseph Smith asked, ‘What is this office and work of Elijah?’ The Prophet promptly answered his own question:

‘It is one of the greatest and most important subjects that God has revealed. . . .’ This is the Spirit of Elijah, that we redeem our dead, and connect ourselves with our fathers which are in heaven. . . . This is the power of Elijah and the keys of the kingdom of Jehovah.⁶

“Some among us still have neither perceived the Spirit of Elijah nor its power. Yet, we are bound by this warning:

‘These are principles in relation to the dead and the living that cannot be lightly passed over. . . . For their salvation is necessary and essential to our salvation . . . they without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect.’^{7, 8}

How can my ancestors receive the ordinances of salvation?

“Vicarious ordinance work done by living proxies enables them to be saviors to the dead. The Prophet Joseph Smith exclaimed: ‘Shall we not go on in so great a cause? . . . Let the dead speak forth anthems of eternal praise to the King Immanuel, who hath ordained, before the world was, that which would enable us to redeem them out of their prison; for the prisoners shall go free.’⁹ “¹⁰

Is doing family history pleasing to the Lord?

“Every thought or word or act we direct at this sacred work is pleasing to the Lord. **Every hour spent on genealogical research, however unproductive it appears, is worthwhile. It is pleasing to the Lord.** It is our testimony to Him that we accept the doctrine of the resurrection and the plan of salvation.”¹¹

How can I gain a testimony of family history?

“But the decision, the action, must begin with the individual. The Lord will not tamper with our agency. If we want a testimony of family history and temple work, we must do something about that work.”¹²

Are there consequences for not redeeming the dead?

“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.**”¹³

Can an ordinary member really do family history?

“Over the years one of the greatest stumbling blocks encountered by those newly involved in family history was the enemy of fear and its attendant feeling of inadequacy. The work of seeking out our dead and insuring that the ordinances are performed in their behalf is a mandate from our Heavenly Father and his Beloved Son.”¹⁴

“WHAT DOES IT MEAN . . .”

What does it mean to be a “proxy”?

Webster’s Dictionary defines proxy as the “authority or power to act for another.”¹⁵

“We do for them what they cannot do for themselves.”¹⁶

What does it mean to “plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers”?¹⁷

“To plant these promises in the hearts of the children, and to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers, was defined by Elder Mark E. Petersen in the October 1971 general conference, as follows:

‘Malachi plainly outlined the mission of Elijah—to establish a bond of interest between present and past generations . . . to create in the hearts of living men and women an interest in their ancestors.’¹⁸

“The seed planted by the Lord, through Elijah’s appearance to Joseph Smith in 1836, was not a full-grown tree, but only a seed. At that time there were no genealogical societies in existence. History confirms that family research in America generally commenced with the forming of the New England Historical Genealogical Society in Boston in 1844.

“Thus, just eight years after that small seed of genealogical interest in our ancestors was planted by Elijah, it began to grow until now, as a result of skills, tools, and computer technology, which have been provided by the Lord, the lowly seed has become a beautiful, fruit-bearing tree.”¹⁹

What does it mean to be a “savior on Mount Zion”?

“If you have been a member of the Church for a very long time you are probably familiar with the phrase ‘saviors on Mount Zion,’ which is often used in connection with genealogy and temple work. **This is not just a phrase, but a very real description of the saving power of ordinance work for the dead.**

“Imagine your own great-grandfather and great-grandmother who desire to unite their family but are helpless to do so because the saving ordinances have not been performed and they lack the power of the Priesthood. **Thus they are unable to inspire, bless, and teach their family members. They are kept in Spirit Prison, which, as we have seen, is also called ‘hell.’**

“**You can actually save people from hell by performing their ordinance work for them.** You cannot of course, determine whether they will accept the Gospel in the Spirit World. But if they do, they become dependent upon us in mortality to save them. We are the key to their salvation.”²⁰

THE BLESSINGS AND PROMISES OF REDEEMING THE DEAD

The blessing and promise of more revelation.

Elder Boyd K. Packer Said: “The Lord will bless you once you begin this work. This has been very evident to my family. Since the time we decided that we would start where we were, with what we had, many things have opened to us. It is my testimony that if we start where we are – each of us with ourselves, with such records as we have – and begin putting those in order, **things will fall into place as they should.**

“It is a matter of getting started. You may come to know the principle that Nephi knew when he said, ‘And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do’. Once you begin this project, **very interesting and inspiring things will happen.**”²¹

The blessing and promise of gaining a deep love for your ancestors.

George D. Durrant, Director in the Priesthood Genealogy Department said: “As you come to know your ancestors, you’ll form a **deep love** for them. You’ll desire to ensure that the temple ordinances are performed for them. Genealogy is the means which will enable you to do that.”²²

The blessing and promise of having the way prepared.

“They do not leave us to struggle alone but rather, **in ways which are sometimes dramatic, prepare the way and answer our prayers.**”²³

“. . . And there are thousands of them, hundred of thousands and millions of them in the Spirit World who long to receive this Gospel and have been waiting hundreds of years for their deliverance. They are waiting on you. They are praying that the Lord will awaken your hearts to their interest. They know where their records are, and I testify to you that the spirit and influence of your dead will guide those who are interested in finding those records. If there is anywhere on the earth anything concerning them, you will find it. That is my promise to you, but you must begin the work. You must begin to inquire after your dead. And the spirit of your heart turning towards them will come upon you, and **if there is a scrap of evidence concerning them upon the earth, you will find it.**”²⁴

The blessing and promise of receiving help in all facets of your life.

“. . . those who give themselves with all their might . . . to this work receive help from the other side, and not merely in gathering genealogies. Whoever seeks to help those on the other side **receives help in return in all the affairs of life**”²⁵

The blessing and promise of receiving the *whole* blessing.

President Howard W. Hunter said: “. . . there are some members who engage in temple work but fail to do family history research on their own lines. Although they perform a divine service in assisting others, they lose a blessing by not seeking their own kindred dead as divinely directed by latter-day prophets.

“I have learned that those who engage in family history research and then perform the temple ordinance work for those whose names they have found will **know the additional joy of receiving both halves of the blessing.**”²⁶

Does working on Family History and Temple work combat selfishness?

“This work, **unselfishly given** in behalf of those on the other side, comes nearer to the unparalleled vicarious work of the Savior than any other of which I know.”²⁷

The blessing and promise of receiving the names of your ancestors in miraculous ways.

Elder Russell M. Nelson said: “Once the families in the Church become organized as the Prophet has counseled, and after we have done all we can as a Church and as family organizations to identify our progenitors, then perhaps we may qualify for this prophetic blessing spoken of by President Brigham Young:

‘You will enter into the Temple of the Lord and begin to offer up ordinances before the Lord for your dead. . . . Before this work is finished, a great many of the Elders of Israel in Mount Zion will become pillars in the Temple of God, to go no more out: they will eat and drink and sleep there; and they will often have occasion to say—‘Somebody came into the Temple last night; we did not know who he was, but he was no doubt a brother, and told us a great many things we did not before understand. ***He gave us the names of a great many of our forefathers that are not on record***, and he gave me my true lineage and the names of my forefathers for hundreds of years back. He said to me, ‘You and I are connected in one family; there are the names of your ancestors; take them and write them down, and be baptised and confirmed, and save such and such ones, and receive of the blessings of the eternal Priesthood for such and such an individual, as you do for yourselves.’ This is what we are going to do for the inhabitants of the earth. When I look at it, I do not want to rest a great deal, but be industrious all the day long; for when we come to think upon it, we have no time to lose, for it is a pretty laborious work.²⁸ ’ ”²⁹

MERE MYTHS

I have a heavy calling in the church right now. Do I still need to do my family history?

“It matters not what else we have been called to do, or what position we may occupy, or how faithfully in other ways we have labored in the Church, none is exempt from this great obligation. It is required of the apostle as well as the humblest elder. Place, or distinction, or where or how else it may have been, will not entitle one to disregard the salvation of the one’s dead.”³⁰

“There somehow seems to be the feeling that genealogical work is an all-or-nothing responsibility. Genealogical work is another responsibility for every Latter-day Saint, and we may do it successfully along with all the other callings and responsibilities that rest upon us. . . You can fulfill your obligations to your kindred dead and to the Lord without forsaking your other Church callings. You can do it without abandoning your family responsibilities. You can do this work. You can do it without becoming a so-called expert in it.”³¹

What if all my family history is done?

“It doesn’t matter whether your computer is able to compile all the family group sheets for everyone that ever lived on the earth, it remains the responsibility of each individual to know his kindred dead. . . Even if the work is done, then it is still each person’s responsibility to study and become acquainted with his ancestors.”³²

What if I have sincerely tried, but I can’t find any more information on my family?

“Revelation comes to individual members as they are led to discover their family records in ways that are miraculous indeed. And there is a feeling of inspiration attending this work that can be found in no other. When we have done all that we can do, we shall be given the rest. The way will be opened up.”³³

PLEASE REMEMBER

“The first principle is that our efforts to promote temple and family history work should be such as to accomplish the work of the Lord, not to impose guilt on His children. Members of this Church have many individual circumstances—age, health, education, place of residence, family responsibilities, financial circumstances, accessibility to sources for individual or library research, and many others. If we encourage members in this work without taking these individual circumstances into account, we may do more to impose guilt than to further the work.”³⁴

NOTES:

1. History of the Church, volume 6, page 313.
2. Elder Henry B. Eyring, “Finding Safety in Counsel,” *Ensign*, May 1997, page 24
3. *A Member’s Guide to Temple and Family History*, page 4.
4. Elder Dallin H. Oaks, “Family History; In Wisdom and in Order”, *Ensign*, June 1989, page 6.
5. See Elder Russell M. Nelson, “A New Harvest Time,” *Ensign*, May 1998, page 34.
6. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, pages 337–38.
7. D&C 128:15; see also D&C 128:18.
8. Elder Russell M. Nelson, “The Spirit of Elijah,” *Ensign*, November 1994, page 84.
9. Doctrine and Covenants 128:22, 24.
10. “Salvation for the Dead,” *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manuel*, pages 445-449.
11. Elder Boyd K. Packer, The Holy Temple, page 255.
12. President Boyd K. Packer, “Your Family History: Getting Started,” *Ensign*, August 2003, page 12
13. Doctrine and Covenants, Section 2, Italics added.
14. President Thomas S. Monson, “Happy Birthday,” *Ensign*, March 1995, page 58.
15. www.webster.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=proxy
16. President James E. Faust, “The Phenomenon That Is You,” *Ensign*, November 2003, page 53
17. See Joseph Smith History 1:39 and D&C 2:2
18. *Ensign*, Jan. 1972, page 49.
19. Elder Earl C. Tingey, “Redemption of the Dead.” *Ensign*, May 1991, page 26.
20. “Salvation for the Dead,” *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manuel*, pages 445-449.
21. Elder Boyd K. Packer, “Your Family History: Getting Started,” *Ensign*, August 2003, page 12.
22. “Doing Genealogy: Finding That Glorious, Elusive Condition Called ‘Ballance,’ ” *Ensign*, April 1985, page 18.
23. President Thomas S. Monson, Happy Birthday, *Ensign*, March 1995, page 58.
24. Melvin J. Ballard, Sermons and Missionary Services of Melvin J. Ballard, pages 230-231.
25. Elder John A. Widtsoe, “Genealogical Activities,” page 104.
26. President Howard W. Hunter, “Temple Motivated People,” *Ensign*, February 1995, page 2.
27. President Gordon B. Hinckley, General Conference, October 1985.
28. *Journal of Discourses*, volume 6 page 295; italics added.
29. Elder Russell M. Nelson, “A New Harvest Time,” *Ensign*, May 1998, page 34.
30. President Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, Volume 2, pages 148-149.
31. Elder Boyd K. Packer, “Someone Up There Loves You,” *Ensign*, January 1977, page 8.
32. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Hearts Turned to the Fathers*, page 184.
33. Elder Boyd K. Packer, “The Redemption of the Dead,” *Ensign*, November 1975, page 99.
34. Elder Dallin H. Oaks, “Family History: ‘In Wisdom and in Order,’ ” *Ensign*, June 1989, page 6.