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Making Covenants with God

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Making Covenants with God

HENRY B. EYRING

All of us can remember times in our lives when we felt a pull to be better than we were, to rise higher. The feeling may have come at about the same time we had the thought “There must be something better in life than this.” Sadly, there are also times when we felt like giving up. And then the thought was something like “Maybe this feeling of being miserable is what life is really like. Maybe I need to learn to live with it. It looks as if that’s how everyone else feels. Those movies about feeling good and those people who look happy have bought into an illusion.” I remember there was even a T-shirt made with a slogan on the front saying, “Life is hard and then its over.” And the look on the man’s face wearing it made it seem that he was living proof.

But everyone that I have come to know well, even the most discouraged and the most miserable, will tell you that sometime in their lives, maybe just once that they can remember, they felt that upward pull, that thought that there just had to be something better and higher.

The feeling that you are meant to be better, perhaps in a way you haven’t yet discovered, comes from our Heavenly Father. The opposing thought, that the upward pull is an illusion, comes from the adversary, who wants us all to be miserable, as he is.

Heavenly Father does more than allow you to feel that upward pull. He has provided a way to rise higher, almost beyond our limits of imagination, not by our own powers alone, which would not be nearly enough, but through the power of the atonement of his Son, Jesus Christ. His prophets have described that gift to us in many ways, but this passage teaches both the idea and gives us that feeling again that there is a way to rise above where we are:

I say unto you, if ye have come to a knowledge of the goodness of God, and his matchless power, and his wisdom, and his patience, and his long-suffering towards the children of men; and also, the atonement which has been prepared from the foundation of the world, that thereby salvation might come to him that should put his trust in the Lord, and should be diligent in keeping his commandments, and continue in the faith even unto the end of his life, I mean the life of the mortal body—

I say, that this is the man who receiveth salvation, through the atonement which was prepared

Henry B. Eyring was a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 8 September 1996.

from the foundation of the world for all mankind, which ever were since the fall of Adam, or who are, or who ever shall be, even unto the end of the world. [Mosiah 4:6–7]

That beautifully describes why you are justified in your hope of changing, of being lifted to a higher plane of living. In another place, in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord describes how we can choose to receive his gift and be lifted toward him and our Father in Heaven. Here are the words that describe that process:

These are they who are just men made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood. [D&C 76:69]

Our Heavenly Father not only provided a savior and a gospel of Jesus Christ that teaches us the purpose of life and gives us commandments, but he provided covenants we could make with him. And with those covenants he provided ordinances where he could signify what he promised or covenanted to do and we could signify what we promised or covenanted to do. All of those covenants, taken together, are a “new and everlasting covenant” (D&C 132:6–7).

Our Heavenly Father has at different periods in the history of this earth adjusted what he has asked of his children because of choices they made, but the new and everlasting covenant has endured and will endure. Here it is described by the Lord as the gospel of Jesus Christ was being restored for the last time:

Behold, I say unto you that all old covenants have I caused to be done away in this thing; and this is a new and an everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning. [D&C 22:1]

Heavenly Father has always helped his children by offering them covenants and empowering his servants to offer ordinances.

President Marion G. Romney named some of those covenants as he described the kindness of our Father in Heaven and of the Savior:

Traditionally, God’s people have been known as a covenant people. The gospel itself is the new and everlasting covenant. The posterity of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob is the covenant race. We come into the Church by covenant, which we enter into when we go into the waters of baptism. The new and everlasting covenant of celestial marriage is the gate to exaltation in the celestial kingdom. Men receive the Melchizedek Priesthood by an oath and covenant. [CR, April 1962, p. 17]

My message to you tonight is one of gratitude to our Heavenly Father and his Son Jesus Christ for offering to make those covenants with us, and it is one of joy that those covenants are what you have always wanted, are what you yearned for when you felt those stirrings for a better life.

My concern is that by looking only at the promises we make, the magnitude of them could overwhelm and perhaps even discourage. Sadly, many of us have seen that happen.

We have taught the gospel to someone who understood it, believed it, but shrank back at the thought of taking on the obligations that come with the ordinance and the covenants of baptism. It just takes issuing the baptismal challenge to a few contacts to have the experience of seeing concern in the eyes of even a believing contact. Perhaps that is why Alma the Elder issued his invitation to accept the obligations of the baptismal covenant in the beautiful way that he did. It is recorded this way:

And it came to pass that he said unto them: Behold, here are the waters of Mormon (for thus were they called) and now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light;

Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life—

Now I say unto you, if this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you?
[Mosiah 18:8–10]

Alma knew what it takes not only to be willing but also to love to make covenants with God. He didn't minimize the obligations: a lifetime of reaching out to every soul whom God may call us to serve, both with comfort and with fearless declaration of the truthfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ as God has revealed it to his authorized servants. The person contemplating such a life can sense what it will take in effort and in courage. Alma knew they would see that, and so he also told them what we need to hear, too. Notice at the end, in only a few words, he told them what God would covenant to do as they kept their part of the covenant: "That he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you." The people he was inviting to the covenant of baptism had already tasted the sweet promptings of the Holy Ghost. Alma gave a promise that is sure: If they would make and keep the covenant in the waters of baptism, they would then be able to receive the ordinance of the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. And then they would not only have an increase in the power and frequency of those sweet promptings of the Comforter, but they could have the promise fulfilled to them of the Holy Ghost as a companion. With every covenant there are great and sure promises from our Heavenly Father. Alma must have known that those

people could anticipate and so would want a life where the Holy Ghost could be a companion.

But he taught more than that. Listen to the words with which he began: "As ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people." Alma knew the covenant was not like a business deal—"you do this for God, and God will do this for you"—but it was an opportunity for them to become his, to become God's people. Every covenant with God is an opportunity to draw closer to him. To anyone who reflects for a moment on what they have already felt of the love of God, to have that bond made stronger and that relationship closer is an irresistible offer. Alma knew the people he taught had felt and recognized the love of God. We may not recognize it, but when our faith lets us see the evidence of God's love in his blessings, we will be as eager to make a covenant to draw closer to him as were the people at the waters of Mormon.

That upward pull we have felt is far more than a desire for self-improvement. It is a longing for home, to be again with the Heavenly Father we have loved and who loves us and to be able to live again with him, feeling the love we felt there and that we can taste here, if we will. And all of us sense the mighty change that must come in us for us to be able to dwell with him again.

We can find that same pattern of describing obligations, promises, and the assurance of growing closer to God in the way the Lord offers us other covenants. The Melchizedek Priesthood is offered with an oath and covenant. You can hear words describing both promised blessings and the assurance of drawing closer to God to become more like him, as well as the obligations we assume:

For whoso is faithful unto the obtaining these two priesthoods of which I have spoken, and the magnifying their calling, are sanctified by the Spirit unto the renewing of their bodies.

They become the sons of Moses and of Aaron and the seed of Abraham, and the church and kingdom, and the elect of God.

And also all they who receive this priesthood receive me, saith the Lord;

*For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me;
And he that receiveth me receiveth my Father;
And he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father's kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him.*

And this is according to the oath and covenant which belongeth to the priesthood.

Therefore, all those who receive the priesthood, receive this oath and covenant of my Father, which he cannot break, neither can it be moved.

But whoso breaketh this covenant after he hath received it, and altogether turneth therefrom, shall not have forgiveness of sins in this world nor in the world to come.

And wo unto all those who come not unto this priesthood which ye have received, which I now confirm upon you who are present this day, by mine own voice out of the heavens; and even I have given the heavenly hosts and mine angels charge concerning you. [D&C 84:33–42]

The magnitude of the promises available through that covenant make the heart beat a little faster. Here are just a few.

When we honor that priesthood, we have heavenly hosts and angels who are watching over us. Some of us know how literally that is true. There are some returned missionaries who know that they have walked down some streets and been in some places and faced some anger and opposition where they have felt protection and being watched over by more than human power. Some of us have an absolute assurance that those whom we have known who held the priesthood who are now part of that heavenly host are deeply aware of what we are doing and sometimes deeply concerned for the quality of our service.

Also, the promise is there that those who receive the servants of God, honoring that priesthood, will have this blessing:

*For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me;
And he that receiveth me receiveth my Father;
And he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father's kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him. [D&C 84:36–38]*

There, again, is the promise that is in all the covenants that God offers to us to make with him: Keeping them will draw us up, closer to him. And even a small recognition of his love makes us want to make covenants with him and to keep them. That love more than wipes out the fear that the magnitude of our promises and the severity of the penalties for failure could create in us.

The covenant God offers us in marriage contains the crowning promise, the one that most touches our hearts. To be sealed in the temple of God by the sealing power that God has restored to the earth allows God to promise us that we may have all that he has, to live the life that he lives, and to be with him, the Savior, and our faithful family members forever in perfect love and harmony. Our promise is complete, too. We promise to give him all that we have and are and all that we may ever have and ever achieve. So the promise is that we may have all he has by our giving all we have. The almost unimaginable imbalance of that exchange, all we have for all he has, is a measure of his love for us. That ought to increase that upward tug we've felt in the way a prophet long ago described feeling in his heart:

Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there. [Alma 36:22]

All of us are blessed by these covenants, whatever our circumstances. There were in the central part of Africa people who could not accept the baptismal covenant because those authorized to administer that ordinance were not yet among them. But they studied the scriptures of the Restoration as well as of the Bible, learned all they could, lived what they understood, and waited. The opportunity to be baptized finally came. They had prepared. Each time I go to the temple to perform an ordinance by proxy for a dead ancestor, I pray that somehow the faithful elders in the spirit world have found them, that they have anticipated this day, and that in their hearts they have been prepared to make and keep the covenants.

The same is true for the oath and covenant of the priesthood and the covenant of marriage in the temple. There might be some young woman listening tonight with the thought “What has that got to do with me?” But then you may go out of this meeting tonight with friends whose lives could be changed forever by how you feel about the oath and covenant of the priesthood and the covenant of marriage in the house of the Lord. You may have more influence than you can imagine on a young man’s keeping the oath and covenant of the priesthood and on whether he will know the joy of making covenants in the temple. If you love those covenants, he is more likely to love and honor them.

All of us need to increase our desire to make covenants with God. A place to begin is to recognize some things that have already happened to each of us. That stirring we have felt to be better, the thought that there must be some higher life and better place, is a gift of faith in covenants with God. We could ask God in prayer to confirm that this is true and that the feeling came from him.

Another recognition of what is past that will increase our desire to keep covenants is to see more clearly the evidence of God’s love for us in what he has done already.

That can be hard. The world tries to tell us that whatever good happens is from our own efforts. And then, in a quick reversal of logic—from the claim that there is no God to the suggestion that he is heartless—the world will say to us, “How can you believe in a god of justice and mercy when such bad things happen to you and to others?” On top of the world trying to get us to believe God couldn’t be the author of our blessings, our natural selfishness can distract us from recognizing and feeling his love. We can focus so much on what we have asked for, which he either hasn’t given yet or may never give because it is not good for us, that we ignore the blessings he has already showered upon us. If we would like to increase our desire to make covenants with God by sensing more clearly his love for us, King Benjamin wrote some words we ought to read frequently. You will remember them, since they are familiar, but you might listen this time not for the rebuke that is there but for the invitation to see ourselves as children favored by a loving Father:

I say unto you, my brethren, that if you should render all the thanks and praise which your whole soul has power to possess, to that God who has created you, and has kept and preserved you, and has caused that ye should rejoice, and has granted that ye should live in peace one with another —

I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants.

And behold, all that he requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised you that if ye would keep his commandments ye should prosper in the land; and he never doth vary from that which he hath said; therefore, if ye do keep his commandments he doth bless you and prosper you.

And now, in the first place, he hath created you, and granted unto you your lives, for which ye are indebted unto him.

And secondly, he doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you; for which if ye do, he doth immediately bless you; and therefore he hath paid you. And ye are still indebted unto him, and are, and will be, forever and ever; therefore, of what have ye to boast?

And now I ask, can ye say aught of yourselves? I answer you, Nay. Ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth; yet ye were created of the dust of the earth; but behold, it belongeth to him who created you.

And I, even I, whom ye call your king, am no better than ye yourselves are; for I am also of the dust. And ye behold that I am old, and am about to yield up this mortal frame to its mother earth.
[Mosiah 2:20–26]

You and I could choose to see Heavenly Father and our lives that way. Even as his mortal body was failing, King Benjamin saw that every covenant he had kept had brought the promised blessings. But on top of that he had received the blessings God pours out on all his children, without regard to their station or even their gratitude. If we could just train ourselves to see as King Benjamin saw, it wouldn't be hard to keep what the Savior described once as the first commandment:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. [Mark 12:30]

We can start down the King Benjamin road tonight by counting our blessings. We could try naming them one by one in prayer tonight, perhaps pausing a moment after each one to let the feelings of gratitude grow. We may not only be surprised by what the Lord has done but by how long we have been kneeling there as the blessings we have not noticed or have

forgotten come flooding into our minds. The covenant promise the Lord made that his disciples could remember his words extends to remembering and recognizing his blessings. I know, because I have tried it. Here is the promise as recorded in John:

But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.
[John 14:26]

That feeling of gratitude and love which will come from that prayer will move us toward wanting to make and keep covenants with God. Those who are not yet members of the Church will be drawn to pray to ask whether the power to baptize was restored through John the Baptist conferring the Aaronic Priesthood upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery and whether the power to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost was returned to the earth by Peter, James, and John. Those of us who have been baptized will review our lives to see what we have done or not done that determines whether the Lord can keep his promise to let the Spirit always be with us. Because we are human still, that reflection usually leads to a desire to repent of things both done and not done.

If we repeat the process often enough and with enough intent, we will feel some desires to honor the oath and covenant of the priesthood. That oath and covenant has blessings in it for all of us, young and old, whatever our situations. You remember the promise:

For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me; And he that receiveth me receiveth my Father; And he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father's kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him. [D&C 84:36–38]

There is a blessing for us in such a small act as inviting a home teacher to give a blessing or asking a bishop if there is any way we could help him in his service. There is a blessing in the way we speak of the prophet of God and in whether we listen when he speaks. We can receive the Lord's servants during general conference simply by yearning to hear their words or by reading them and pondering when we can. When we receive the Lord's servants, we receive him. In that we are all blessed, or we can be, by the promises in the oath and covenant of the priesthood.

Within the family there may be for us greater opportunities to welcome the powers promised through the priesthood and thus welcome the Lord. Every person in a family has an effect on the power of the priesthood exercised there. For a solitary member it may be to ask for a home teacher to give a priesthood blessing. For the child of a father growing indifferent to his priesthood covenants it may be the quiet request "Dad, I'd like you to be with me when I go to the temple" or "Dad, it would mean so much to me if you could set me apart." More than one man has started upward again, never to turn back, after hearing and feeling such a plea from his child.

The covenant of a temple marriage may seem distant, either because it appears unattainable or because the cares of a busy life have eroded the meaning it had when the covenants were made. But every child of God is promised every blessing if they are faithful. And where those covenants were made, the blessings are still available. In just the last few days I heard a young girl report a night of baby-sitting. That doesn't sound very celestial, and it had its challenges for her. But the reports of little kindnesses shown, of patience, of long-suffering, made me think of a passage of scripture that may not have occurred to her that night. It goes this way:

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned. [D&C 121:41]

This young girl may not have been thinking of marriage and of the home she may someday have, of children, and of a priesthood holder in it as her companion. But she was choosing that night to live in such a way that if someday God gave her such blessings, those children and that husband would experience and expect, simply by her example, the kind of care that is given by the true servants of God. And if she were so blessed, her husband would be drawn upward in his priesthood service just by what that little girl, grown older, would bring to that home and family.

We can do the things now that will lead us to love, make, and keep covenants. And we can without invading their agency invite others by example to love and want to make and keep covenants. Because of what we do, they can look forward to the peace and the hope that can come from keeping the baptismal covenant, from receiving those who honor the oath and covenant of the priesthood, and from associating in a home where people are living so that they might be sealed to live forever in the presence of our Heavenly Father and his Son Jesus Christ.

Now I want to tell you what I know. I have not talked to you about theory. I have talked to you about what I know. I know that God, our Heavenly Father, lives. I have felt his patient and enduring love all my life. I know that Jesus is the Christ, that through his sacrifice and love we are cleansed and sanctified as we obey the laws of the gospel. I know that the ordinances and covenants offered through the keys of the priesthood held by President Gordon B. Hinckley are honored by God when we honor them. I promise you that the promises are true. I pray that you will accept them in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.