

FINDING JOY IN TEMPLE AND FAMILY HISTORY WORK

D&C LESSON #40

by Ted L. Gibbons

INTRODUCTION: Several years ago as I was about to depart for work, a call came from my Bishop. His oldest son had disappeared. He had eaten breakfast and dressed for elementary school, but when his mother was ready to drive him and his sisters to school he could not be found. They thought perhaps he had walked to school. His mother transported her daughters and then made a search. The boy was not at school. It was at this point that calls went out to the police and to several ward members. I delayed my departure for work and along with several dozen others, commenced an intensive search of the neighborhood. After a few hours his mother found him, curled up on the floor of his closet with the door closed. He was fast asleep.

I have reflected many times on the shared anxiety of so many to find this boy, to see that he was safe again with his family, to insure that nothing unacceptable happened to him.

The search for that boy is a metaphor for this lesson. You see, I have ancestors lost in history. We all do. They languish in the spirit world, waiting and hoping for someone to find them. Our longing to locate the dead who are lost should be as compelling as our anxiety to find the living who are lost.

1. THE SPIRIT OF ELIJAH IS PROMPTING PEOPLE TO TURN THEIR HEARTS TO THEIR ANCESTORS.

Elijah came to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the children to the fathers.

With that, natural affection between generations began to be enriched. This restoration was accompanied by what is sometimes called the Spirit of Elijah—a manifestation of the Holy Ghost bearing witness of the divine nature of the family. 8 Hence, people throughout the world, regardless of religious

affiliation, are gathering records of deceased relatives at an ever-increasing rate. (Russell M. Nelson, "A New Harvest Time," *Ensign*, May 1998, 34)

The increasing concern with our ancestors is demonstrated by the fact that Genealogy is now among the fastest growing areas of non-commercial use of computers in the home. A recent PBS broadcast about family history called *Ancestors* was the highest-subscribed program in their history. 340 of 353 PBS stations scheduled the program.

This spirit of Elijah does not need to work through priesthood channels. Multitudes of our neighbors have been touched by a longing to look backward and find their roots. Consider this sweet story:

Joe Groom also had a special experience with his father as a result of family history. Unlike Sandy, Joe had a wonderful relationship with his father, who was active in another faith. "It seems like in every generation there are family members who have that spirit of Elijah," says Joe, "and in our family it just happened to be my father and me. We published a family history book together."

But Joe and his father had one line where their research came to a dead end. When Joe's father became terminally ill, they joked about his sending back a message telling Joe how to get past that block. Three days after his father's funeral, Joe took a trip to Atlanta, but he was able to spend only two hours in the Georgia State Archives. He reached down and picked up a book at random and began to flip through it. Stopping to glance at two pages, he found the information he needed to know to get past the block on his father's line.

"I almost fell over," remembers Joe. "I wanted to scream. Then a peaceful feeling came over me and a thought came into my mind: 'Did you get it?' I knew my dad had helped me." (LaRene Gaunt, "Family History Wellspring," *Ensign*, Aug. 1993, 24)

And we will need all the help we can get!

The estimated population of the world in A.D. 1 was 200 million; by 1850 it had reached one billion (see *The World Almanac and Book of Facts* 1995 [1994], 510). By mid-1995, the world's population was estimated at 5.76 billion. Over time, as many as 105 billion people may have lived on the earth. (Estimates courtesy of Population Reference Bureau, Washington, D.C.; see Carl Haub, "How Many People Have Ever Lived on the Earth?" *Population Today*, 23 [Feb. 1995]: 4–5).

The number of completed proxy temple endowments is approaching an estimated 140 million, meaning that this work has been performed for about .13 percent (just over one-tenth of 1 percent) of the earth's estimated historic population of 105 billion. Obviously, an enormous amount of work remains to be done.

Considering the scope of the unfinished work for the dead, Elder Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said in 1977:

"When we contemplate how big it is, it is astonishing; it is past astonishing, it is overwhelming!

"But it is not discouraging. ...

"If the numbers seem staggering, we will move ahead. If the process is tedious, we will move ahead anyway. If the records have been lost, if the obstacles and opposition are overwhelming, we will move ahead anyway" (*That They May Be Redeemed* [address delivered at regional representatives' seminar, 1 Apr. 1977], 1–2; emphasis in original).

Have you felt the spirit of Elijah prompting you to move ahead? How has this work touched your life?

2. EACH MEMBER OF THE CHURCH CAN PARTICIPATE IN TEMPLE AND FAMILY HISTORY WORK.

Since Family History is one of the three great missions of the church (see

James E. Faust, "The Magnificent Vision Near Palmyra," *Ensign*, May 1984, 68) we ought to insure that we are involved. I have often felt that each of us ought to be doing something in each of these three areas continuously. This should not be an overwhelming burden.

Our effort is not to compel everyone to do everything, but to encourage everyone to do something" (Elder Dallin H. Oaks: "Family History: 'In Wisdom and Order,' " *Ensign*, June 1989, 6)

The Sunday School manual suggests four activities that will allow us involvement in this work.

A. *Have a current temple recommend and attend the temple regularly:* I have frequently described a temple recommend as *an invitation to the house of the Lord*. Come and visit me in my house, he seems to be saying, and he has promised that if we come worthily, his glory and presence will be there (see D&C 97:15,16) Where else in the world is the fulfillment of such a promise available? I have had tickets that gave me front-row seats at two Jazz games. My son drove from Orem to San Diego because he had a ticket to a U-2 concert there. My wife and I flew to Hawaii using free tickets earned with frequent-flyer miles. But there are no tickets like this one—tickets (if you will) to the House of the Lord. And we can use it at any of his houses anyplace in the world. We ought to qualify for a temple recommend every year, and use that recommend as often as we can.

In addition, we ought to encourage our children who are 12 or older to have recommends to do baptisms for the dead. My son who graduated from high school last May arose at 5:00 AM many mornings to go with his friends to the Mt. Timpanogos temple to participate in this sacred ordinance. Why not make it a family tradition for all family members who are 12 or older to get their recommends at the same time each year?

B. *Prepare to have ordinances performed for deceased relatives.* With the increased number of Family History Centers, access to the needed information and to skilled help in completing this work is more available than ever before. I remember the uncounted hours my father spent with books and histories trying to locate & record the

necessary names and dates. So much of the difficulty of this work has evaporated with the advent of computers with their research programs and access to the church's family history site on the Internet. My circumstances make the search more interesting. My ancestors and those of my wife have been in the church for generations. But there are still those others who lack the ordinances and who are longing for someone—anyone—to make the effort to provide them. Your family lines may be fairly new to the church, and your family history work may consist of collecting information from living friends and relatives. Whatever the work, whatever the requirement, we ought to be appropriately involved in this work.

- C. *Learn about ancestors' lives.* There are so many inspiring, delightful, even humorous stories regarding those who went before. As we find such treasures, we ought to file them and share them with family members. I located a brief 1858 journal in Special Collections at BYU. It was written by my great grandfather about a mission to the Moqui Indians of Arizona. It is fragmented, incomplete, poorly written, and ungrammatical, and yet it is a treasure of faith and devotion. My children and my siblings have been richly blessed by its inherent message of trust in God.
- D. *Keep a journal or prepare a personal history or a family history.* President Kimball taught: We hope you will begin as of this date. If you have not already commenced this important duty in your lives, get a good notebook, a good book that will last through time and into eternity for the angels to look upon. Begin today and write in it your goings and your comings, your deeper thoughts, your achievements, and your failures, your associations and your triumphs, your impressions and your testimonies. We hope you will do this, our brothers and sisters, for this is what the Lord has commanded, and those who keep a personal journal are more likely to keep the Lord in remembrance in their daily lives. ("President Kimball Speaks Out on Personal Journals," *Ensign*, Dec. 1980, 61) Joseph Smith ". . . advised the elders all to keep daily journals. 'For,' said he, 'your journals will be sought after as history and scripture . . .' That is the way the New Testament came, what we have of it, though much of the matter there was written by the apostles from their memory of what had been done, because they were not prompt in keeping daily journals." (Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus, comps., *They*

Knew the Prophet, p. 65)

President Kimball also said “We renew our appeal for the keeping of individual histories and accounts of sacred experiences in our lives—answered prayers, inspiration from the Lord, administrations in our behalf, a record of the special times and events of our lives. From these records you can also appropriately draw as you relay faith-promoting stories in your family circles and discussions. Stories of inspiration from our own lives and those of our forebears as well as stories from our scriptures and our history are powerful teaching tools. I promise you that if you will keep your journals and records they will indeed be a source of great inspiration to you, each other, your children, your grandchildren, and others throughout the generations.” (“Spencer W. Kimball, “Therefore I Was Taught,” Ensign, Jan. 1982, 4)

3. THE CHURCH PROVIDED MANY RESOURCES TO HELP US PARTICIPATE IN TEMPLE AND FAMILY HISTORY WORK.

In order to complete any assignment, four things are necessary: 1) clear instructions; 2) the necessary tools; 3) sufficient time; and 4) a willing heart. Are any of these lacking in your efforts to fulfill this assignment? Numbers 1 and 2 have been supplied by the church. The rest must come from us.

CONCLUSION: What follows may be the longest conclusion in the history of lesson-writing. But this lovely story says everything about Family History. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

My Friend—Far Away and Long Ago By Peggy Hill Ryskamp

The priest flipped on a recently installed electric light, and as the naked bulb swung gently from its cord I looked around the shadowy room it illuminated. The floors were cement, and except for two ancient and sagging cabinets against the wall, all the room contained was a rickety wooden table and chairs. As the priest opened the shuttered windows for us, we saw a mixture of wild shrubs and flowers and could hear a donkey braying somewhere close by.

My husband, who had spent many hours here on previous trips, looked around with a smile of enormous satisfaction and went with

the priest to an adjoining room to get the record books. I was left alone in the room, trying to get used to what I was seeing.

So—we had really made it after all! I thought of how impossible a trip to Spain to do genealogical research had seemed in the first place, how much planning it had taken to assemble a clientele, the weeks of agonizing over finances, the prayers and tears over leaving the children, and the lists and lists of things to do.

George was soon back with the records, and with excitement showed me the volumes filled with page after page of thick parchment where priests had been noting marriages, baptisms, and deaths since the 1500s. They were impressive, and I settled down to help George search them, hoping that his enthusiasm would sustain me.

Unfortunately, as the hours and days wore on, I found that what came so naturally to George didn't come naturally to me. He could spend hour after hour poring over the pages, totally oblivious to his physical surroundings. But I found that I noticed—and responded to—every detail. The wooden chair became unbearable to sit in after a couple of hours, the shadows from the light bulb made it hard to read, and it was so cold that my back ached at night from shivering.

My reactions were both embarrassing and frustrating to me. George had always found genealogical research stimulating, and I had prayed that the experience would be just as exciting for me. But the long, cold, stiff hours seemed endless.

Finally it came time to start a new line in a different parish. Since we were working “from scratch” on this line, George searched through the marriage book while I worked on baptisms and births. Although I was looking for the children of three different couples, I found myself particularly intrigued by one family in the records. I began to feel like I knew the mother as I found the record of each of her children's births. The spacing of her children was similar to mine, and I reminisced about my own pregnancies and the reactions of our children to each new baby. I had been away from home for two weeks now, and the memories of children's noises, soggy kisses, and exuberant hugs were sweet to me.

Then George suggested that I work on death records for a while.

Since I was still in the same period, the names I found were familiar to me, and I noted the deaths of several of the older family members. But I was not expecting so many younger deaths, and tears of sympathy filled my eyes when I recognized the name of one of my “friend’s” children who had died at the age of three. When I turned the page and found, eight days later, the death record of her six-year-old, my heart lurched and the tears spilled.

I thought again of my own little ones, exactly the same age—the feel of their little bodies nestled in my lap, the sound of their laughter and voices in the house. The distance of an ocean gave me compassion, and I continued to cry and empathize as I turned the pages.

But when I found the death of her husband six months’ time later, I was so upset I had to stop writing, and even George noticed my sobs. “I just can’t understand why she had to go through this,” I told him. “It doesn’t seem fair.”

And then suddenly a true understanding of phrases I had been hearing and saying my entire life came to me, and feelings and thoughts rushed together. “Dear friend,” I thought, “that’s why I’m here. Your suffering wasn’t without purpose; there is something I can do for you. Thanks to a loving Savior and a temple of God, I can help give you back your husband and your children. They can be yours forever now, just as I have mine.”

The tears kept running down my cheeks, but they were tears of peace and joy, a humble gratitude for temples and families and a chance to do something to help.

Since returning from Spain, going to the temple is a deeper experience for me. As I check the name pinned to my sleeve, I feel a respect for this woman. She coped with physical deprivations and a closeness with death that I have never had to experience. And although I am not able to share with her my hot water or shampoo, or the medicine I so nonchalantly give my sick children, I can share that which means the most to me, the blessings of the gospel. (Peggy Hill Ryskamp, “My Friend—Far Away and Long Ago,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1985, 67)

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