



# HOW FAMILY HISTORY CHANGES OUR Hearts and Minds

*Researching our family history and providing temple ordinances for our ancestors help us see the vastness but also intimacy of God's plan.*

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For years, every time I attended the temple, I thought of my great-great-grandmother Hannah Mariah Eagles Harris (1817–88), but not because I needed to perform proxy temple work on her behalf.

Mariah (as she preferred to be called) is one of the reasons my family is even in the Church. She was baptized in 1840 in England, was endowed in Nauvoo, Illinois, was sealed to her husband in Winter Quarters, Nebraska, and died in Utah. My thoughts about her while I was in the temple were not about her need to have ordinances performed but about how those ordinances bound her and me together across time and space.

As a child I lived in the same Utah town she had lived in, and eventually I visited Winter Quarters, Nauvoo, and the small English village where she was born. I was struck by the vast distances she had traveled and by the vast differences between her life and mine.

Despite the span of time, space, and circumstance that separates us, however, I feel connected to my great-great-grandmother both through the sealing covenant and by knowing about her life. That connection illuminates the reasons behind family history work specifically and temple worship more generally.



Engaging in family history research teaches us of the vastness and grand scope of God's creation and underscores the individual and merciful reach of Christ's Atonement.

## Greater Love through Family History

The Lord has taught that though the worlds He has created for His children are “innumerable . . . unto man; . . . all things are numbered unto me, for they are mine and I know them” (Moses 1:35). Family history and temple work offer us an opportunity to join in Jesus Christ's work of salvation.<sup>1</sup> Doing so can

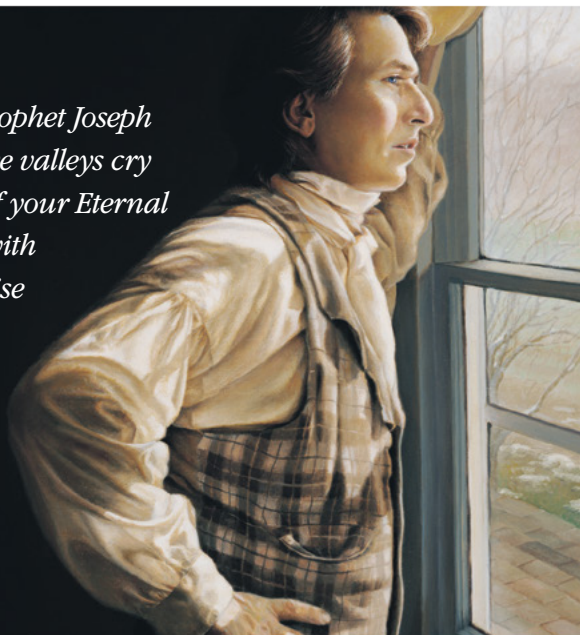
help us learn how to love and be merciful to our families, to our neighbors, to everyone we meet, for they are all our brothers and sisters.<sup>2</sup>

In remembering our own ancestors, we recognize the scope of Heavenly Father's plan and creation. The Lord created a place for us to be tested and to have faith, but because very few people get the chance to receive the fulness of God's covenants while in mortality, the mercy of proxy work reminds us that the Lord loves *all* His children and has provided a way that all may choose to accept the full blessings of the gospel regardless of their circumstances in mortality (see 2 Nephi 26:20–28, 32–33).

In addition, learning about our ancestors' lives can remind us that not everything in life will work easily, that there will be disappointments and inequalities in this fallen



*Regarding the doctrine of salvation for the dead, the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote: “Let the mountains shout for joy, and all ye valleys cry aloud; and all ye seas and dry lands tell the wonders of your Eternal King! And ye rivers, and brooks, and rills, flow down with gladness. Let the woods and all the trees of the field praise the Lord; and ye solid rocks weep for joy! And let the sun, moon, and the morning stars sing together, and let all the sons of God shout for joy! And let the eternal creations declare his name forever and ever!” (D&C 128:23).*



world. But learning about their lives and performing ordinances for them can also remind us that no one is outside the reach of God’s love (see Romans 8:38–39).

My grandmother Mariah was energized by this truth when she first heard it preached. In 1840–41, during the first wave of proxy baptisms done in the Mississippi River and the partially completed Nauvoo Temple, she seized the opportunity to be baptized for her deceased sister, who had died before missionaries arrived in England.<sup>3</sup> Though I’ve never met Mariah, I share with her a love of siblings and a knowledge that this love can continue beyond death because of temple ordinances. Sharing in that knowledge with her inspires a love for her as well.

It is not surprising that the Prophet Joseph Smith was nearly overcome with the beautiful and merciful doctrine of salvation for the dead, which he described as the “most glorious of all subjects belonging to the everlasting gospel” (D&C 128:17): “Let the mountains shout for joy, and all ye valleys cry aloud; and all ye seas and dry lands tell the wonders of your Eternal King! And ye rivers, and brooks, and rills, flow down with gladness. Let the woods and all the trees of the field praise the Lord; and ye solid rocks weep for joy! And let

the sun, moon, and the morning stars sing together, and let all the sons of God shout for joy! And let the eternal creations declare his name forever and ever!” (D&C 128:23).<sup>4</sup>

Like Mariah, who enthusiastically went to be baptized for her sister, other early Saints were equally joyful. One of those early Saints, Sally Carlisle, wrote: “What a glorious thing it is that we believe and . . . now can be baptized for all our dead friends and save them as far back as we can get any knowledge of them.”<sup>5</sup>

### **For All—and for the One**

As these reflections show, the vastness of family history is tempered by the personal. We learn of not only the scale but also the depth of the Lord’s love, for He cares for the individual. The Lord who sees the falling of the sparrow and seeks after the one lost lamb out of a hundred (see Matthew 10:29; Luke 15:4) does not redeem us en masse, but one by one, just as He administered to the people during His earthly ministry and just as He blessed the people gathered at the temple in Bountiful (see 3 Nephi 17).

Similarly, the Lord taught the early Saints a meticulous standard of record keeping for proxy work done for each

individual (see D&C 128:1–5, 24). Thus, we undertake painstaking work to identify individual ancestors, not just catalogs of names. Through this work we glimpse God’s mercy, His compassion, and the worth of an individual soul.

In addition, learning the stories of our ancestors’ lives helps us learn to love them, no matter their flaws and shortcomings. As we learn how the vicissitudes of mortality shaped our ancestors’ choices, we feel compassion for them. This process should refine our ability to develop the same kind of love for the living, both within our families and for all of God’s children. Feeling more deeply that all people, even the majority who came to earth without an opportunity to receive the covenants and ordinances, are children of heavenly parents helps us appreciate that life is a test of faith and fortitude for everyone who ever lived, “according to the use they made of the light which [God] gives them.”<sup>6</sup>

The refining influence of family history work can increase our own capacity for love. If we grow to love people long since dead, who lived very differently from us, then will we not come to realize how loving and merciful God is toward us? And can we not then love our families and neighbors and be compassionate with their shortcomings?

When others see the only known photograph of my grandmother Mariah, they often comment on how grim or unpleasant she appears to them. I immediately defend her because I know her. I know the person that walked along the River Severn as a young girl and as a mother with small children. I know the person who sailed across an ocean, giving birth to her fourth child during the journey. I know the person who sent a husband to war and lost an infant

child during his absence. I know the person who walked 1,000 miles (1,609 km) to a new home in the western American desert. I know the person who worked and covenanted and farmed and loved. And in knowing her, I get a taste of our heavenly parents’ love for her and for each of their children.

### Family History—the Grand Scope and the Merciful Reach

The heart of family history is not about using a computer; it is not about reading old handwriting or making scrupulous notations and citations. Those are tools or functions of family history, but they are not the heart of family history, nor do they grasp the significance of why Latter-day Saints seek after their ancestors. Family history, in its essence, teaches us the grand scope of creation and redemption and simultaneously reminds us of the personal and merciful reach of Christ’s Atonement.

Searching after our ancestors can have a similar effect on our hearts and minds when we realize that all of those people—“numberless as the sand upon the sea shore” (Moses 1:28)—are children of heavenly parents and are loved and known by them. No wonder Joseph described entrance into the celestial kingdom as passing through a gate of “transcendent beauty” (D&C 137:2), for what could be more transcendentally beautiful than to be saved with those we know and love, who have, like us, also been redeemed by God’s expansive and personal love? I look forward to meeting with grandmother Mariah at that gate. ■

#### NOTES

1. See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 473.

2. Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught that one function of the spirit of Elijah—a special manifestation of the Holy Ghost—is to “bear witness of the divine nature of the family.” This can mean both the divine nature of our mortal familial relationships and also the divinity and potential of all of God’s children. See Russell M. Nelson, “A New

Harvest Time,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 34. See

also Richard G. Scott, “The Joy of Redeeming the Dead,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2012, 93.

3. Mariah Harris baptized for sister Edith Eagles, 1841, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Nauvoo Proxy Baptism Records, 1840–1845, Family History Library US/Canada film 485753, item 2, volume A, page 42.

4. For an in-depth discussion of how Smith family deaths influenced Joseph Smith’s search for answers about salvation for the

dead, see Richard E. Turley Jr., “The Latter-day Saint Doctrine of Baptism for the Dead” (BYU family history fireside, Nov. 9, 2001), [familyhistory.byu.edu](http://familyhistory.byu.edu).

5. Sally Carlisle, in Steven Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations* (2008), 470–71.

6. *Teachings: Joseph Smith*, 405; see also Deuteronomy 8:2; Moroni 7:16; Doctrine and Covenants 76:41–42; 127; 137:7–9; Abraham 3.