

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

BY ELDER NEIL L. ANDERSEN
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

As you live righteously, you will find that during your lifetime your perspective will enlarge many, many times.



As we see through our generations, both backward and forward, we see who we are, and we see more clearly what we must become.

As a college student, I was taking a class in a large amphitheater classroom. Entering the classroom on one of those first days of the semester, I sat in the very back, far from the professor. As he began writing on the blackboard, and as those around me began taking notes, I realized that I could not see what they could see on the chalkboard. Up until that very moment I had not imagined that I needed glasses. I had not anticipated glasses in my future.

But that experience led me to the optometrist and to a pair of glasses. Suddenly my world improved immensely. I could see many things that I had not been seeing for some time. The world became much more alive for me. I remember asking myself, “Why didn’t I realize before that I needed glasses? How could I have not known that I was not seeing?”

While seeing can be a function of our eyes, we also use the word *see* to mean *understand* or *comprehend*. Have you ever asked, “Don’t you see what I mean?” And

haven’t you responded at some time, “Oh, now I see.”

As you live righteously, you will find that during your lifetime your perspective will enlarge many, many times. Usually this shift in perspective is not a dramatic one that you can see from one day to the next, but over time the advances are significant.

The most important perspective we want to gain was described beautifully by the Savior: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).

God’s Plan for Us

Let us look more closely at His plan for us—a plan He has called “the great plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8). For this we must speak of His words to both ancient and modern prophets.

You have been who you are for a very, very long time. We are sons and daughters of heavenly parents who love us and who have sent us on a course to become more



Three thousand years ago the Lord covenanted with a righteous man named Abraham, promising him that “in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18).

There was a covenant made, a people established, and a promise that through this people many great things would come to pass in the latter days.



like Them. We lived in the premortal existence prior to our coming to earth. We were taught of our Heavenly Father’s plan. We would receive a physical body; we would learn to choose good over evil. The Only Begotten Son of the Father offered Himself as the Savior of the world, allowing us a way to return to our heavenly home. We rejoiced in the plan, and we “fought for it. Many of us also made covenants with the Father concerning what we would do in mortality. In ways that have not been revealed, our actions in the spirit world influence us in mortality” (Dallin H. Oaks, “The Great Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1993, 72).

We do not have all the answers, but it is very clear that our life is not a

coincidence—and that it is not by chance that we find ourselves here at this time in human history.

Seeing More Clearly

The Restoration scriptures explain a beautiful linking of the generations that, once understood, opens our view, and we see our lives in a more complete way.

Three thousand years ago the Lord covenanted with a righteous man named Abraham, promising him that “in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18). There was a covenant made, a people established, and a promise that through this people many great things would come to pass in the latter days.

When the Savior visited the Nephites following His Resurrection, He said to them: “Ye are the children of the prophets; and ye are of the house of Israel; and ye are of the covenant which the Father made with your fathers, saying unto Abraham: And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.

You and I are “children of the covenant” (see 3 Nephi 20:25–26). The Savior has declared it, and I confirm it to you. As we come to understand what it means, we see more clearly. Mortality comes more into focus. Just like putting on glasses and seeing the blackboard of our mortality, our understanding grows.

The Apostle Peter described members of the Church as “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9).

It is not by chance that we find ourselves within this holy lineage, the blood of Israel, with a promise and a destiny that through our lives and the lives of our posterity all the peoples of the earth will be blessed (see 1 Nephi 15:18; 3 Nephi 16:5–7; D&C 39:11).

When we see ourselves in the perspective of this holy family, those who came before us and those who come after us become very important to us. I heard President Gordon B. Hinckley say on more than one occasion, “I have been thinking a lot about my grandfather and grandmother. I have been thinking a lot about my father and my mother. I have been thinking just a little about myself and my dear wife. And I have been thinking a lot about my children, about my grandchildren, and about my great-grandchildren.” And then he has concluded with this phrase: “And I have been thinking a lot about this wonderful link that binds us all together” (President Hinckley speaking at Vernal, Utah, and Campinas, Brazil, temple dedications).

Now you might say, “But my parents and grandparents were not like President Hinckley’s; they were not members of the Church.” Or, “They were not faithful in the Church.” Or, as a man in Argentina who I called to be a stake president said to me: “I don’t even know who my father is.” He had been given the family name of his mother. He had not heard the name of the Church until he was 18 years old. How could he be part of this royal family?

Through miraculous circumstances—that we will one day appreciate more than we can now explain—each of us has been brought into this covenant family and we

have become children of the covenant. It is not necessary that we be able to explain every detail. Here is where we reverse “seeing is believing” to “believing is the beginning of seeing.” I confirm to you that it is not by chance that we are here and that we are who we are.

Notice in President Hinckley’s words that he looked both back through his generations—his parents, grandparents, great-grandparents—and forward through his generations—his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

This is the major point I want to make: As we see through our generations, both backward and forward, we see who we are, and we see more clearly what we must become.

If we can look back through the generations, we see those who helped us to get where we are now—those who forged the way before us, whether they were members of the Church or not. And in the restored gospel we realize even more deeply our responsibility to link them to us through the ordinances of the temple.

In a letter from the Prophet Joseph Smith to the members of the Church, we read: “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” (D&C 128:15; see also verse 18).

Now let’s see through our generations forward. Who will be your children and your grandchildren? Or, if by chance you do not marry, who will be those you influence in the generations ahead? What is our responsibility for those who follow us?

As we are righteous, there is a power in the priesthood that passes through us into our posterity, shaping their eternity as it shapes ours.

As you can learn to see through the generations—by looking back and by looking forward—you will see more clearly who you are and what you must become. You will better see that your place in this vast, beautiful plan of happiness is no small place. And you will come to love the Savior and depend on Him—as His great gift to us makes this all possible. Your influence will continue generation after generation throughout all eternity. **NE**

From a devotional address given at Brigham Young University on May 16, 2006.