

Families Under Fire

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This address was given at the 2003 Families Under Fire Conference.

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Several years ago in a neighborhood not far from my home, dozens of bright yellow balloons were seen floating from every tree branch and light post lining a winding three-block road. Senses were stirred as one drove with anticipation along that beautiful sight on that hazy winter day. Around each bend in the road rose the yellow balloons, waving upward to the top of the hill where they warmly proclaimed: “Welcome Home, Brigham!” I had heard of Brigham Fordham only a few months before when I was told of this eighteen-year-old’s tragic accident that had left him paralyzed. I only now discovered that this was his home and his homecoming from the hospital. I noticed the ramp that had been built on the front of the house, and I thought of other changes that would have been made in his home to accommodate the changes in his life. There would be changes for Brigham’s family, too, I thought. Life will be different for all the Fordham family—and difficult. But, as the yellow balloons brightly signaled to Brigham and to all who had the opportunity to travel this street, his was a caring home and neighborhood where family love and strength would be found.

Our Heavenly Father has organized us into families for the purpose of helping us successfully meet the trials and challenges of life. The home also exists to bless us with the joys and privileges of family associations. Our family is our safety place, our support network, our sanctuary, and our salvation.

In his book *The Power of the Family*, Dr. Paul Pearsall declares there is a “power of loving energy that flows within every family circle . . . during the joy of the best of times and

particularly at times of sorrow of the worst of times” (New York: Doubleday, 1990, p. 354).

He states, “No matter what the form of your family, from single-parent household to the largest multi-generation family in your town, your work at keeping families together is the job of saving our world” (Ibid., p. 351).

Many years ago, President Harold B. Lee said, “Our homes should be the strong place to which children can come for the anchor they need in this day of trouble and turmoil” (*His Servants Speak*, comp. R. Clayton Brough, Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1975, p. 154).

Today the home itself is in trouble and turmoil. Our families are under fire! Just as we have witnessed the recent firestorm raging out of control on our nearby Wasatch mountain range, we see a firestorm raging out of control against the traditional family. On every side there are flames of destruction licking at the foundation and structure of the family.

The media seems to be bursting with stories about families falling apart from the effects of social conditions which exist in our neighborhoods, communities, and country. Here are just a few recent headlines:

Drugs destroy life of teen!

Family disputes create violence, crime!

Suicide is a major cause of death among young adults.

Divorce destroys more than 50 percent of current-day marriages.

Children taken from parents by Child Protection Agency.

Husband shoots wife while her boyfriend hides in closet!

Same-gender marriage next on high court’s agenda!

Canada to legalize same-gender marriages!

Traditional marriage laws under attack!

Senators treat citizen concerns about the preservation of traditional marriage as nonsense!

These horrid headlines tell how viciously the families of today are being fired upon by the agents of evil. We live in a world of changing values—a world trying to keep us apart from God, a world where much is being fired upon us that can weaken or destroy our resolve to do good.

In September of 1995 a warning was issued to the world by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve: “We warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets” (The Family: A Proclamation to the World, September 1995).

Dr. Pearsall expresses the opinion that families aren’t failing, but we are failing the family because we have not learned how to put family first in our world. He writes: “Our society is interfering with the family-first feature. We are in familial bankruptcy and have fallen into the hands of receivers such as schools, businesses, recreational pursuits, and numerous institutional demands. The issue is not one of setting priorities; the issue is one of making difficult choices for

the family. There can only be one number one, he stresses. Is it your family?" He makes this emphatic statement: "I warn you that if your family does not come first, your family will not last" (Pearsall, p. 18).

The Lord, through His prophets, has taught us of the divine power and influence of the home. "There is no substitute for the home," said President Joseph F. Smith. "Its foundation is as ancient as the world, and its mission has been ordained of God from the earliest times" (*Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1939, p. 300).

From the Family Proclamation we learn that because the family is ordained of God, "Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities."

Alex Hayley, who gave us the incredible story of his *Roots*, was once asked how he was able to cope with the difficult challenges and trials that came to his family. His answer: "Find the good and praise it" (*Parade Magazine*). We must find and preserve the good around us and arm ourselves with those values that will build a strong defense of Godly power and influence.

Here are some current headlines of goodness:

Tour de France: Armstrong falls. Competitors slow down for him to return to the race.
Neighbor risks life to save family from fire!
Medical science research demonstrates that patients who pray, who have a faith in God, do better and heal more quickly.
Man finds money sack filled with over \$200,000 and returns it to a bank.
Man donates kidney to stranger.
Stranger donates bone marrow to save young man's life!
Preacher fights courts to keep Ten Commandments in City Hall!

A few weeks ago American Mothers, Inc., hosted an interfaith conference in the Church's Conference Center in Salt Lake City. The theme of that conference was: "The American Family: Standing Together, Standing Strong." In the concluding address of that impressive conference, President Thomas S. Monson noted: "There seems to be the beginning in our society of a return to basic virtues, an appreciation of the value of the traditional family. . . . It just may be that the world is sick of sin, discouraged by degradation and fed up with falsehoods. When true values and basic virtues overlay and undergird the families of society, hope will conquer despair, and faith will triumph over doubt." (*Church News*, September 20, 2003, p. 10.)

William J. Bennett wrote in the introduction of his book, *Virtues of Family Life*: "Home is the place where children receive their first instruction in the virtues, the moral training ground where right is separated from wrong. It is the place where parents do the most important teaching of all. The early experiences of home become a moral compass point, guiding and instructing us for the

rest of life's journey.”

Focusing our attention on teaching and living the simple, basic teachings of the Savior in our homes will strengthen our families, perfect the society in which we live, and improve ourselves. It will enable us to successfully combat the erosion of the family, which presidents of the Church have repeatedly said is the greatest challenge in the world today. Our first line of defense in a world of spiritual and moral decay is and will continue to be the home and family. It requires personal time and sacrifice and consistent effort to accomplish this essential goal.

Christlike qualities instilled early in one's life establish values that lead one to make correct choices and to take effective actions. Values of honesty, integrity, truthfulness, and honest labor serve as cornerstones of confidence and faith in a person's life.

Some weeks ago I was visiting my daughter's family and witnessed her husband teach their sons a valuable lesson through a seemingly small incident. Two little grandsons, ages four and six, were romping and teasing and scuffling as boys sometimes do. In an instant, the playful antics became rather serious as the two contested for possession of a little chain that the older boy had “won” as a prize in return for the quarter he put into a machine at the grocery store. The younger boy claimed it was his now, because his brother had given it to him when it got knots in it! The knots had been removed (by this Grandpa), and now the original owner wanted the chain back. The boys' father became the mediator of this matter and listened with patience to their case. I listened with interest as this wise father taught his young son, “You gave your word. When you give your word, you keep it.” It was a difficult lesson to learn at the moment, but it was an essential lesson in integrity that would pay great dividends in molding the character of these precious boys.

A few days later I was not surprised to learn that this son-in-law had just been honored in his community for his own integrity, for “being known to fight for what's right” as a city councilman. The values we are able to impart to our children are those that were taught in the homes and hearth of our own youth and will be those our children pass on to their offspring. It has been said, “Children are like wet cement; whatever falls on them makes an impression” (Haim G. Ginott).

As a teenage boy I worked for a building contractor pouring concrete foundations for new homes. I learned that concrete was made of a mixture of very simple elements which of themselves were not stable enough for a firm foundation. But, mixed together in proper sequence and proportions, tiny grains of sand, small pebbles, water, and cement powder form a unique substance of unusual strength and durability. For a few hours after the concrete is mixed, it can be poured into any desired form. At first, before it is completely cured, even a tiny bird hopping across its soft surface will leave an imprint. Later, however, it becomes so firm that an elephant can walk over its surface without leaving any tracks.

Just as a few simple elements combined in a proper way to form a sturdy foundation for a house, so do the simple, basic teachings of the gospel bond together to make a strong home and form

the foundation of faith and character needed for the preservation and protection of our families.

In contrast, we must also be aware that there are small things that can destroy or weaken us. Tiny grains of salt sprinkled on concrete can actually cause it to break up and crumble if they are not removed. Similarly, small steps taken in the wrong direction, ignored or uncorrected, can weaken and eventually destroy our lives. Big problems grow out of thinking that little things do not matter. In homes where high ideals and gospel values are maintained, parents lay the foundation of character and faith in the hearts of their children. If the training a child should receive in the home is neglected, neither the Church, nor the school, nor society can compensate for the loss.

Our Church leaders have stated: “No Church organization can supplant the parents in discharging this obligation. The best the Church can do is to give every aid possible so that the parents will be left without excuse in discharging this most sacred and vital work of building a solid foundation in the home” (Family Home Evening Manual: Love Makes Our House a Home, 1974, p. 2).

As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have been given every aid possible and a plan with a promise that, when followed, will help us save and secure our families in all of life’s trials and challenges. We have been promised by our prophets that our homes and our children will be strengthened and fortified through faithful and regular family scripture study and family home evenings.

On the night of September 21, 1989, Hurricane Hugo passed with all its fury over the beautiful city of Charleston, South Carolina. My good friend, Alvie Evans, lived in a low-lying area near the water where the maximum strength of the storm was headed. He gathered his family together and moved to higher ground, to the home of his mother.

Late in the night, 140-mile-per-hour winds raged around them, uprooting trees and ripping away parts of the house. The storm became so severe they began to fear they would experience physical harm. Alvie, with his wife and children, his mother, and his brothers and sister and their families, knelt together in the entrance hall of the home and prayed humbly to the Lord, asking for protection and for safety.

The next morning they viewed the devastation. Of the fifty or more large, strong oak trees that had been growing in his mother’s yard, only eight remained standing. There was damage to the house, the cars, the entire city, but the family was safe. The Lord had heard their prayers and had protected them through the storm. Alvie said, “I didn’t know then if we would have a house to return to, but I knew we would always have a home, because our family was intact and secure.”

Praying together, seeking to know the will of our Father in Heaven, and desiring strength to do His will draws Him near to us. This practice unifies family members in a common direction with a common purpose. It builds in our children a foundation of faith which will guide them through

the challenges and opportunities of life. It establishes God as their lifeline.

During the Korean War, I was serving aboard a small U.S. Navy aircraft carrier. One of our planes returning from a bombing and strafing run was badly damaged. When the pilot tried to land the plane, it careened off the deck and plunged over the side of the ship. As the plane flipped over, one of its wheel struts wedged into a gun mount, leaving the plane dangling upside down over the water. The pilot was rescued, and our deck team prepared to retrieve the plane from its precarious position over the water. To secure the retrieving cable around the plane, a crane had to be released from its saddle mount over the side of the ship. I was sent out on the round arm of the crane to release it. Donning a life jacket, and with lifelines attached to my waist and upper torso, I inched my way out over the water toward the crane's saddle. The men holding the lifelines were ready to save me should I fall off the beam into the churning ocean alongside the steaming carrier.

When I arrived at the point where I could reach the release bolt, it appeared to me that the bolt was rusted and would need a hard physical thrust to free it from its position. I made ready, wrapping my legs around the slippery beam and placing my rigger's spike in the eye of the bolt. When I felt somewhat secure, I gave a quick, hard push on the spike. To my surprise and to that of those holding onto the safety lifelines, the bolt sprang free without any resistance to my push. My body swung off the beam and made a complete circle of the beam, and I landed back on top of it, firmly in place. The men holding the lifelines were so amazed by what happened that they did not pull on their ropes, leaving me safely on the beam. It was a miracle to me. Had the men pulled on their lifelines I would have been thrown off the beam and down into the ocean.

Several days later we returned to port in Japan to repair the ship and the several damaged aircraft aboard. In the mail awaiting me was a letter from my mom. One of the lines in the letter struck my heart very deeply. It read something like this: "Dear Rex, we don't worry about you. We pray for you every day." It was then I realized that the true lifeline which had been about me to save me from the fate of falling into the ocean was the lifeline of faith extending from a watchful Heavenly Father through a faithful mother's prayers.

When faithful parents pray with their children and for them, they provide a feeling of security and protection in their lives that is not available under any other condition. Having regular family and personal prayer is vital for us to receive the great blessings of the Lord's comfort and peace. We never can foretell the consequences of such prayers. Reading the scriptures with our children will also fortify our families with spiritual strength by providing answers to questions and giving direction through the teachings of the Lord.

President Ezra Taft Benson promised that we can keep our children close to us and to the Lord and that we will receive "blessings hitherto unknown" if we will faithfully read the Book of Mormon together and "abide by its precepts." He said that in the Book of Mormon we will "find great power, great comfort, and great protection" (*Ensign*, November 1986, p. 7).

My grandson Clark was given the Saturday chore of mowing the lawn while his father drove to

the airport to pick me up for a weekend visit. He was challenged to have the lawn looking its best by the time Grandpa arrived. Clark dutifully went about his duties, but much to his frustration he could not get the power mower to start. He tried pulling on the starting cord with all of his might, but to no avail. Realizing he needed help, he telephoned his mother who was at the church preparing for an activity. Her counsel to Clark was to pray about the problem. Clark thought about that for a time and wondered if it would be right to ask the Lord to do something as insignificant as starting the lawn mower. As he pondered he remembered the account of Nephi in the Book of Mormon. He thought, “If the Lord would help Nephi build a boat, I guess he would help me start the lawn mower.” (See 1 Nephi 17–18) Clark prayed for help then went again to pull the starter cord on the mower. The mower started immediately. He said he knew it would.

The old adage is true which says: “When we want to talk to God, we pray. When we want Him to talk to us, we read the scriptures.” When children are taught this truth in their homes, they will always know where to turn for strength and help in their time of need. Another valuable aid we have been given by the Lord to assist us in strengthening our homes and saving our families is family home evening.

Three very fine young teenage brothers were asked by an expectant first-time father, “What is the secret I need to know for my children to turn out just like you?” One of the boys quickly responded, “We have very long family nights!”

President Hinckley has counseled us to “keep Monday night sacred for family home evening.” To keep “sacred” means “to dedicate or set apart for worship.” Sacred also is defined as “dedicated or devoted exclusively to a single use or person” (American Heritage Dictionary, Third Edition, p. 722). If our families are to endure, parents and children must dedicate this night—actually every night and day—for teaching and living the gospel ideals that ensure preservation of home and family.

President Hinckley recently reminded the brethren of the priesthood of our responsibilities to our families. He said it is imperative that we not neglect them. He admonished us to spend time with our wives and our children. He said, “Together with them, determine how much time you will spend with them and when. And then stick to it. Try not to let anything interfere. Consider it sacred. Consider it binding. Consider it an earned time of enjoyment” (Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting, June 2003).

A revealing story has been told of Charles Francis Adams, grandson of John Adams, second president of the United States. He was a successful lawyer, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and the U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain. Amidst his responsibilities, he had little time to spare. He did, however, keep a diary. One day he wrote, “Went fishing with my son today—a day wasted!”

On that same date Charles’ son, Brooks Adams, had printed in his own diary, “Went fishing with my father today—the most wonderful day of my life” (Scott Walker, *Daily Guideposts*: 1994,

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Nearly a decade ago in General Conference, Elder Neal A. Maxwell asked, “Given the gravity of current conditions, would parents be willing to give up just one outside thing, giving that time and talent instead to the family?” (*Ensign*, May 1994, p. 90). This question deserves even greater consideration today.

Sometimes though we work very hard doing everything we have been counseled to do, we may not be able to keep a child from harm’s way. President Hinckley was asked in an interview: “What would you say to parents who have heeded the counsel to have family home evening and are living their covenants to the best of their ability—and yet they have a son or daughter who has gone astray?”

President Hinckley answered, “Well, you do the very best you can. And when you have done that, you just place the matter in the hands of the Lord. Go forward with faith.” Sister Hinckley added, “Never give up” (*Ensign*, October 2003, page 25).

We must all go “forward with faith” and “never give up” in our endeavors to protect and safeguard our families. We must do all we can in our homes, our schools, our community, and our nation to combat the influences that are openly presenting themselves to us and to our family members as acceptable behaviors in our society. If we would defend our ground we need to be on it! We cannot leave this responsibility to others.

I spoke a few days ago with a Brigham Young University acquaintance, Eugene Bramhall, chair of a J. Reuben Clark Jr., Law Society subgroup. He spoke of an interesting goal the group has of seeking to encourage men and women of all religious persuasions to create a “zone of virtue and goodness” around themselves. This group believes that each person has an influence upon others by their personal demeanor in the office as well as in the courtroom, in the community as well as in the home. He expressed his belief that neighbors around us are effected as much by this “zone of virtue and goodness” that can be created by our righteous and moral actions as by any other thing we say or do.

Let us be informed, be aware, and be concerned enough to do our part in the cause of building and maintaining a defensive “zone of goodness” in our homes and communities.

More than a century ago, Eliza R. Snow wrote a hymn which is timely for us today:

Think not, when you gather to Zion, your troubles and trials are through,
That nothing but comfort and pleasure are waiting in Zion for you:
No, no, ’tis designed as a furnace, all substance, all textures to try,
To burn all the “wood, hay, and stubble,” the gold from the dross purify.

Think not, when you gather to Zion, that all will be holy and pure;
That fraud and deception are banished, and confidence wholly secure:
No, no, for the Lord our Redeemer has said that the tares with the wheat
Must grow till the great day of burning shall render the harvest complete.

Think not, when you gather to Zion, the prize and the victory won.
Think not that the warfare is ended, the work of salvation is done.
No, no: for the great prince of darkness a ten fold exertion will make,
When he sees you go to the fountain, where freely the truth you may take.
(*Hymns*, 1948, #121)

In closing, I share with you the experience of a family that was literally “under fire” and a father who understood the meaning of President McKay’s well-known statement about the value of a gospel-centered home and family: “The poorest shack in which love prevails over a united family is of greater value to God and future humanity than any other riches. In such a home God can work miracles and will work miracles” (Conference Report, April 1964, p. 5).

On a Sunday morning several years ago, Donald Pinnell, then president of the Amarillo Texas Stake, was attending church in his branch in Tucumcari. Suddenly, someone brought him the alarming news, “Brother Pinnell, your home is on fire!”

Brother and Sister Pinnell had just built their dream home, a Spanish-style house on their ranch fifty miles out in the country. It was a very nice home and a source of great pleasure to their family. President Pinnell quickly found his two sons, ages twelve and sixteen, and drove toward his ranch. His first thoughts were of his wife who had stayed home that day recuperating from recent surgery. He had no word about her until the driver of a returning fire truck stopped along the way to tell him she was safe.

As he and the boys approached the top of the terrain, they could see in the distance the smoke coming from their burning home. Donald Pinnell said of that moment, “We could tell that our home was completely engulfed in flames, and I just stopped the car at the top of the hill for a few minutes. I said to my sons, ‘Now look, you can spend all your life storing up treasures of the earth, and you can sit on a hill and watch them go up in flames; or, you can store up the right kind of treasures and take them with you through eternity.’”

I testify that the fires that threaten our families today can be quelled as we go forward with diligence and faith, accepting personal responsibility as guardians of our homes and families. I testify that the power of the Lord is the greatest power of all and in His might we can and will be victorious. Jesus is the Christ, our Savior and Redeemer, and it is His desire to preserve and protect His people and their families.