

The Essential Problem in Life

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“Stand Forever” Episode 4

The big picture is a big deal. Few things provide greater comfort, confidence, and clarity than looking beyond present cares to see and remember the big picture. Except for the Holy Spirit, there may be nothing more helpful to brave life’s perils than seeing and remembering the big picture—the whole map.

You may live life in the weeds, but if you don’t see beyond them you will think life is only weeds. When we stand back, the big picture looks like this:

- A.** *The essential problem in life is separation from God Our Father.*
 - *Without God, chaos, darkness, and death prevail.*

- B.** *Jesus Christ bridges the gap if we will believe and follow Him to the end and help others do the same.*
 - *He is the Way offsetting chaos, the Truth offsetting darkness, and the Life of setting death.*

- C.** *Therefore, cross the bridge and close the gap; believe and follow Christ to the end and help others do the same.*

That is the big picture and the primary framework for this series. Hello, I am Larry Corbridge, and this is the *Stand Forever Series*. The focus of this episode is the first assertion: “The Essential Problem in Life.”

William Wordsworth, one of the great English Romantic poets, is particularly known for this beautiful and insightful verse:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home¹

¹ “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” *William Wordsworth*

Life did not begin with birth. Before this life we lived, learned, and progressed in the presence of Our Heavenly Father. As the sun sets in one hemisphere and dawns in another, the dawning of our birth here was also the setting of a marvelous phase of life in the presence of God who is our Father and our “home.”

Never are the limitations of our faculties more evident and never are words more inadequate than when employed in the attempt to comprehend and describe the expanse, wonder, glory, and grandeur of God’s creations and plan for His children. And His greatest creation is you. You are not only created in His image; you are His spiritual offspring.

In the Old Testament, Zechariah says that God “stretcheth forth the heavens, and layeth the foundation of the earth, and formeth the spirit of man within him.”² God’s first recorded words to Jeremiah were about where he came from before this life, saying: “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.”³

The Almighty God of heaven and earth is the Great Creator of the cosmos, the universe, and all things in them. He is the Author of the plan of salvation, omniscient and omnipotent. But first and foremost and above all things, He is a parent—a father, a very good father, a perfect father, an Eternal Father. He is your father. You are His child.

To speak of a divine spark within you is a huge understatement. As the poet said, you come “trailing clouds of glory.” You are endowed with astounding intelligence which permeates every cell and molecule of your body, intelligence which surpasses understanding and yet is undeniable. More than your earthly parents, your heavenly parentage is the essence of who you are. Your earthly parents gave you the marvelous blessing of a body which YOU animate and inhabit, but without you, your body will die while you will live on.

God is not only your Father but the source of light, security, knowledge, love, joy, peace, wisdom, strength, power, order, purpose, fulfillment, life, and every other good thing. **You come from the security of a heavenly home but now you are away from home, separated from your Heavenly Father not only physically but spiritually and in character, knowledge, and power as well. It is the disparity between who and where God is, and who and where we are.**

² Zechariah 12:1

³ Jeremiah 1:5

That separation in all its dimensions is the essential problem in life. One might say it is the central or critical problem in life, but it is essential in the sense that it is necessary to our development and is simply the reality that we have much to learn and do to become like our Heavenly Parents.

Like children leaving home to make their way in life, we willingly left the security of our heavenly home and family to make our way here in this life and prepare for the next. Surely Heavenly Father knew, and we must have known as well, how difficult this life would be and how much would hang in the balance of mortality. Heavenly Father knew, and we must have known as well, that we would stumble and fall along the way. And yet we chose to come because God promised a Savior who would help us when we fall, so that our falling would not be failing.

On the website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we find this (fairly long) description of our premortal life under the heading *Council in Heaven*. Do not dismiss it even if it seems elementary and familiar (prosaic). The greatest truths are time-worn, and we cannot appreciate why we are here without remembering from whence we came. Here is the quotation:⁴

In the premortal life, our Heavenly Father called a Grand Council to present His plan for our progression.⁵ We learned that if we followed His plan, we would become like Him. We would be resurrected; we would have all power in heaven and on earth; we would become heavenly parents and have spirit children just as He does.⁶

We learned that He would provide an earth for us where we would prove ourselves.⁷ A veil would cover our memories, and we would forget our heavenly home. This would be necessary so we could exercise our agency to choose good or evil without being influenced by the memory of living with our Heavenly Father. ... He would help us recognize the truth when we heard it again on earth.⁸

At the Grand Council we also learned the purpose for our progression: to have a fulness of joy. However, we also learned that some would be deceived, choose

⁴ "Council in Heaven", Topics and Questions, online at churchofjesuschrist.org

⁵ See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 209, 511

⁶ See Doctrine and Covenants 132:19-20

⁷ See Abraham 3:24-26.

⁸ See John 18:37

other paths, and lose their way. We learned that all of us would have trials in our lives: sickness, disappointment, pain, sorrow, and death. But we understood that these would be given to us for our experience and our good.⁹ If we allowed them to, these trials would purify us rather than defeat us.¹⁰

At this council we also learned that because of our weakness, all of us except little children would sin.¹¹ We learned that a Savior would be provided for us so we could overcome our sins and overcome death with resurrection. We learned that if we placed our faith in Him, obeying His word and following His example, we would be exalted and become like our Heavenly Father. We would receive a fulness of joy.”¹²

Despite its risks and rigors, you gladly chose to come here. The Lord asked Job “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” He then said “the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy,”¹³ presumably at the prospect of life on earth. Your voice was in that joyful chorus.

Speaking of the premortal world, Joseph Smith said, “God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.”¹⁴

God’s commandments are not meant to restrict or vex but exalt us. This brings us to what I call “ABC.” I call it that because it is yet again another syllogism in scripture, but not just any, rather it is a primary if not the central message God has revealed to His children from the beginning of time.

There are two ways to study scripture, close-up and from a distance. The close-up approach plumbs the depths of a single verse, a few verses, or a single topic. To study at a distance, however, is to stand back and read for broad messages, patterns, and repetitions.

The Old Testament (along with The Pearl of Great Price) reveals God’s earliest communications with His children from the beginning of time. One of the primary messages is “ABC.” It is seen by studying at a distance. Although ABC is a pervasive

⁹ See Doctrine and Covenants 122:7

¹⁰ See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (2006), 15–16

¹¹ See Doctrine and Covenants 29:46-47

¹² “Council in Heaven”, Topics and Questions, online at churchofjesuschrist.org

¹³ Job 38:4, 7

¹⁴ *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, 210

pattern throughout the Old Testament, I offer here only a few examples out of hundreds.

To see ABC once is to understand in your head, but to see its pervasiveness is to move it from the head to the heart, and then it makes a difference. **It is not just the message that is important; it is also its prevalence.**

First example, Moses proclaimed: “Know ... that the Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations (forever) Thou shalt therefore keep the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which I command thee this day, to do them.”¹⁵

The second example of ABC is a more extensive version of the Lord’s admonition to Israel, as found in Deuteronomy 28 and 29. Because it is so long, I will abbreviate it for our purposes here.

1 if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the LORD thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth:

2 And all these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God.¹⁶

The Lord then describes a very long list of specific blessings, followed by a warning:

15 ¶ But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that **all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee.**¹⁷

The Lord then describes an even longer list of curses, none of which anyone wants to experience. The Lord then concludes:

9 Keep therefore the words of this covenant, and do them, that ye may prosper in all that ye do.¹⁸

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 7:9, 11

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 28:1-2

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 28:15

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 29:9

Unabbreviated, that is a long passage of scripture, but it serves to illustrate the lengths to which the Lord has gone to teach it. ABC is one of the primary messages of the Old Testament.

Only God can preserve, prosper, prepare, perfect, and bless us. That is an essential truth threaded throughout the entire fabric of the Old Testament but never more prominently than in the Book of Isaiah.

Israel was prone to forget God, seeking protection and prosperity through alliances with other nations instead of trusting in the Almighty God, the Creator of heaven and earth and all things therein, **in whose hands the destinies of all nations and men reside**. God repeatedly said to trust in Him before the arm of flesh. Here are some examples of ABC from Isaiah:

Chapter 1: "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land."¹⁹

Chapter 26: "Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord JEHOVAH is everlasting strength."²⁰

Chapter 41: "Fear thou not; for I *am* with thee: be not dismayed; for I *am* thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness ... For I the LORD thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee ..."²¹

Chapter 43: "O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called *thee* by thy name; thou *art* mine. When thou passest through the waters, I *will be* with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee ... For I *am* the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour ... Fear not: for I am with thee ... I, even I, am the Lord; and beside me there is no saviour. I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed, when *there was* no strange *god* among you: therefore ye *are* my witnesses, saith the LORD, that I *am* God. Yea, before the day *was* I *am* he; and *there is* none that can deliver out

¹⁹ Isaiah 1:18, 19

²⁰ Isaiah 26:4

²¹ Isaiah 41:10, 13

of my hand: I will work, and who shall let it? ... I, *even I, am* he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins."²²

Chapter 44: "Thus saith the LORD that made thee, and formed thee from the womb, *which* will help thee; Fear not, O Jacob, my servant ... For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring: And they shall spring up *as* among the grass, as willows by the water courses ... Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I *am* the first, and I *am* the last; and beside me *there is* no God."²³

Chapter 46: "And *even* to *your* old age I *am* he; and *even* to hoar hairs will I carry *you*: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver *you*. To whom will ye liken me, and make *me* equal, and compare me, that we may be like?"²⁴

So, let's piece ABC together now. What would be A. (the major premise)? It begins with "Only God can" How would you finish that sentence?

A. **Only God can bless you;** only He can cause your heart to beat and give you breath; only He can preserve and protect you; only He can give you strength to bear up the burdens of life; only He can give you power, knowledge, peace and joy; only He can forgive your sins; only He can heal you; only He can change you and forge a godly soul; only He can bring you back into His presence; only He can bless you.

Next is B. (the minor premise). How would you finish this sentence? "He will do all of that (bless you) and more if"

B. **He will do all of that and much more if you remember Him to keep His commandments.**

What then is the conclusion?

C. **Therefore, remember Him to keep His commandments. It is the only intelligent thing to do.**

²² Isaiah 43:1-3, 5, 11-13, 25

²³ Isaiah 44:1-4, 6

²⁴ Isaiah 46:4, 5

Now listen to this, it is a monumental mistake to be dismissive of ABC because of its simplicity. Some of the greatest truths are the simplest. Life is not easy, but it isn't complicated. It doesn't require a PhD or great intellect to figure out.

Standing alone, ABC is old news, but that is part of its significance. It is the oldest of news. From the beginning of time God has repeatedly invited His children to trust Him, not instead of everyone and everything else, but above anyone or anything else.

Read the scriptures, especially the Old Testament with ABC in mind and see how many times it emerges. It is in the account of (warning this is a long list) Cain and Able, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Moses, Joshua and the children of Israel, Gideon, Samson, Ruth, Hannah, Esther, Eli and sons, Samuel, David, Solomon, Elijah, King Josiah, King Asa, King Jehoshaphat, King Hezekiah, King Manasseh, King Amon, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, the sons of Ephraim, Joel, and Jonah. (I said it was a long list.) It is repeated hundreds of times over, more than the constraints of this episode will allow in detailed explanation.

As I said, to see ABC once is to understand in your head, but to see its pervasiveness is to move it from the head to the heart, and then it makes a difference. **It is not just the message that is important; it is also its prevalence.**

But there's a problem, we don't keep God's commandments all the time. We make mistakes, and when we do we may withdraw ourselves from the Spirit of the Lord which is God's presence in this world.²⁵ And before we know it, we are left unto ourselves, separated from God, His blessings and power.²⁶ That is what King Benjamin characterized as our "awful situation."²⁷ It is the worst of all, the essential problem in life.

Separation from God and His Spirit is the hardest part of Heavenly Father's plan for His children. As a result, there is a hole in every heart. There is a longing, a yearning, an emptiness, and a sense of something missing like a faint hum we constantly hear but are not fully aware of. For, as glorious and beautiful as our world is, we sense we are here temporarily to be fitted for another and better life.

Alister McGrath, a Northern Irish theologian and Anglican priest observed:

²⁵ Mosiah 2:36, 37

²⁶ Doctrine and Covenants 121:36, 37

²⁷ Mosiah 2:40

Many have found that the awesome sight of the star-studded heavens evokes a sense of wonder, an awareness of transcendence, that is charged with spiritual significance. Yet the distant shimmering stars does not itself create this sense of longing; it merely exposes what is already there. They are catalysts for our spiritual insights, revealing our emptiness and compelling us to ask whether and how this void might be filled.

Might our true origins and destiny somehow lie beyond those stars? Might there not be homeland, from which we are presently exiled and to which we secretly long to return? Might not our accumulation of discontentment and disillusionment with our present existence be a pointer to another land where our true destiny lies, and which is able to make its presence felt now in this haunting way?

Suppose that this is not where we are meant to be but that a better land is at hand? ... The beauty of the night skies or a glorious sunset are important pointers to the origins and the ultimate fulfillment of our heart's deepest desires. But if we mistake the signpost for what is signposted, we will attach our hopes and longings to lesser goals, which cannot finally quench our thirst for meaning."²⁸

Many try to fill the void with money, degrees, recognitions, titles, possessions, career-success, vacations, entertainment, drugs, alcohol, pornography, promiscuity, and self-indulgence. Much of what we do is touched by a hazy, almost unconscious, desire to fill the void and recover the security and warmth we once knew. The best we can do on our own is with friends, family, and selfless service, but even still it is not enough. Listen to this: **On our own, nothing is enough, because the void is the separation from God, and only God's presence can fill it again.** And in this life, God's presence is His Spirit or power which we do not merit and cannot have on our own.

The essential problem in life is separation from God our Father. Without God chaos, darkness, and death prevail.

In coming episodes, we will explore in greater depth some of the dimensions of that problem, and then we will turn to the Solution. I hope you will stay with me on this journey and stand forever.

²⁸ Alister McGrath, *Glimpsing the Face of God: The Search for Meaning in the Universe* (Eerdmans, 2002), 292