The Big Picture

20 Family-Friendly Lessons on God’s Plan for You

John Hilton III and Anthony Sweat
Other Books by John Hilton III and Anthony Sweat

Why? Powerful Answers and Practical Reasons for Living LDS Standards

How? Essential Skills for Living the Gospel
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Preface

This book can be used in two ways.

First, this is a book written for teenagers to sit down and read. If you’re a teenager reading this book, great! You are who we are writing to! We hope this book provides you with additional knowledge and insights about God’s plan so that you can go forward and use those truths to guide your everyday life. We promise you that you will be blessed as you follow “the great plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8).

Second, this is also a book that parents and teachers can use as a resource when teaching the gospel. Because this book is written to teenagers, perhaps the best thing you can do is to hand it to your child and ask him or her to plan the lesson! As you go through each chapter, you’ll periodically find three different kinds of icons.

The Teach the Plan icon that includes a number on it. We refer back to these icons at the end of each chapter where we have provided a lesson outline to help you teach the material in family settings, church, or mutual.

In every chapter, you’ll also see the Experiment upon the Word icon. It identifies a hands-on activity that you can do to help you “experiment upon [the word]” (Alma 32:27) and learn more about God’s plan for you.
Each chapter also includes a Live the Plan icon that invites you to act on the truths of the plan you are learning.

We know that true doctrine, understood, has the power to change attitudes and behavior. Our sincere desire is that this book can assist you in teaching youth to understand the vital doctrines that are a part of the plan of salvation.
If you were lost in a dense forest or jungle and could go a thousand feet in any direction, which direction would you go to help you find your way? North, south, east, or west?

Actually, the best direction to go would be a thousand feet straight up. Such a move would help you gain a big-picture perspective of the terrain around you and you could know which way you should go.

Similarly, some people are metaphorically lost in the jungle of life—not knowing which way to turn to find lasting peace and happiness, not understanding the purpose of life, and sometimes not even knowing what is right or wrong. With a limited view, some things in this life can seem confusing, unfair, and uncertain. But when we look heavenward, we are able to gain better perspective and find answers. As we pull back and see the big picture, as we more fully understand God’s plan of salvation for us, we can more easily understand why things happen, how we should act, and what we should do to find our way in life.

A Three-Act Play

Have you ever sat down in the middle of a movie and been totally confused by what is going on? President Boyd K. Packer likened this feeling to our mortal life. He said:

The plan of redemption, with its three divisions, might be likened to a grand three-act play. Act I is entitled “Premortal Life.” . . . Act II, from birth to the time of resurrection, the “Second
Estate.” And Act III, “Life after Death or Immortality Eternal Life.”

In mortality, we are like one who enters a theater just as the curtain goes up on the second act. We have missed Act I. The production has many plots and sub-plots that interweave, making it difficult to figure out who relates to whom and what relates to what, who are the heroes and who are the villains. It is further complicated because you are not just a spectator; you are a member of the cast, on stage, in the middle of it all!

Scan this QR code or go to http://delivr.com/1k77m to see an example of what it might feel like to jump into the middle of a play and how it relates to the plan of salvation.

The Big Picture

The plan of salvation is God’s plan “to enable each of us to enjoy all His blessings.” If somebody asked you to draw a big-picture overview of God’s plan of salvation, what would you draw? What about something like this?

![Diagram of the plan of salvation]

- Premortal Existence
- Mortality
- Physical Death
- Spirit World
- Paradise
- Spirit Prison
- Resurrection
- The Grave
- The Veil
- Final Judgment
- Celestial Kingdom
- Terrestrial Kingdom
- Telestial Kingdom
- Outer Darkness
While this picture does not fully capture everything about the plan of salvation, there are some good things about it. It paints in broad strokes the history and destiny of mankind: We lived with God in a premortal existence. After having passed through the veil of forgetfulness, we are now on earth, experiencing mortality without being able to remember our life in the premortal existence. At the end of our mortal life, we will die, and, depending on what we’ve done and become in our lifetime, we will go to either spirit paradise or spirit prison. Eventually, we will all be resurrected (become immortal with a body of flesh and bone), be judged, and be assigned to a kingdom where we will live forever after.

But there are other ways we can draw the big picture of the plan of salvation. What about this one?

This drawing emphasizes different aspects of the plan of salvation. It shows what have been called “the three pillars of eternity”—the creation of the world, the fall of Adam and Eve, and the atonement of Jesus Christ. These were crucial events in the history of the world, and very important to our personal, eternal progression. Because of these pillars, we can continue on the straight and narrow path through the principles and ordinances of the gospel, and return
to live with God. The far right-hand side of this diagram shows the
ultimate purposes of God’s plan for us: “Eternal Life,” or to be with
God and become like Him.

Here’s yet another “big picture” view of the plan:

This picture helps us see that we are trying to get from where we
are now (our fallen condition) back to the presence of God (where
we once were) to receive all His blessings, live with Him, and be like
Him. It shows we can do that through Christ and the ordinances of
the priesthood.

While each of these diagrams are helpful in their own way,
they can sometimes be confusing. There are a lot of circles,
lines, arrows, and images. There are many topics and do-
ctrines that often aren’t fully explained in the visual presentations: our
premortal existence, the Creation, the Fall, Jesus’ Atonement, faith,
baptism, temple covenants, the spirit world, resurrection, celestial
kingdom. And sometimes in the middle of all the circles and lines
and topics and doctrines, we can also overlook the whole purpose
of life—we can miss out on the very point of the plan of salvation.
Like the proverbial saying goes, we can’t see the forest because of all
the trees.
What Is the Overall Purpose of the Plan of Salvation?

In five words and with only one arrow, here is a simple summary of the plan of salvation that we feel gets to the heart of the plan:

Premortal Spirit  ➔  Become like God
(start)  (end)

God has said that His work and glory is “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). Eternal life means God’s life, or becoming like our Heavenly Father and living a life full of joy. President Joseph F. Smith taught, “We must become like [God]. . . . This is the object of our existence in the world.”

And President Lorenzo Snow summarized the plan of salvation so beautifully when he declared: “As God is now, man may be.”

Understanding that the overall purpose of life is to become like our Heavenly Father helps us better understand the “why” of life and know the “how” about things we must do. We start to understand that this life is a test—a test to determine if we will live a life like God’s and therefore enjoy all His blessings.

Once we have this main idea fixed in our mind—that God is trying to help us become more like Him—all other aspects of the plan of salvation begin to make more sense and fall into place. The purpose of this book is to get beyond all the circles, lines, and images and help explain the different aspects of God’s plan—most important, how the truths of the plan of salvation can give us power and purpose and perspective in our everyday living. In the midst of the jungle of mortality, this book attempts to help us rise a thousand feet heavenward and get an eternal view of God’s divine plan of salvation for our life.
THE BIG PICTURE

We Should Study and Live the Plan of Salvation

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that the plan of salvation “is a subject we ought to study more than any other. We ought to study it day and night.”7

And Elder Bruce R. McConkie said, “As rapidly as we learn the plan of salvation and get ourselves in tune with the Holy Spirit . . . our whole souls will be filled with light and understanding.”8

It isn’t enough to just study about the plan of salvation. We have to live it too. Did you know that the lyrics to the famous hymn “I Am a Child of God” originally read, “Teach me all that I must know to live with Him someday”? President Spencer W. Kimball requested that the words be changed to “Teach me all that I must do to live with Him someday.”9

Consider singing “I Am a Child a God” as a closing hymn at your next family home evening, and ponder how the change in the lyrics could spark a change in your own life.

Scan this QR code or visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epNjOrfmdIA to watch “We Can Find Happiness”—a video of people who have found happiness from studying and living God’s plan of salvation.
Teach the Plan!

The “Big Picture”
of the Plan of Salvation

Objective: To help learners gain a clear understanding of the “big picture” of the plan of salvation.

Attention Getter: Show your children a map of the Amazon rain forest or the Sahara desert. Ask your children the question next to Teach the Plan #1.

Question: Ask your children the question next to Teach the Plan #2 and have a child read the accompanying quote from President Boyd K. Packer.

Visual: Watch the video linked at Teach the Plan #3.

Activity: Give each of your children a blank piece of paper and something to draw with. Invite each child to draw out the major parts of the plan of salvation. Then show them the different depictions of the plan of salvation that follows Teach the Plan #4.

Discussion Questions: The following questions may help your children in understanding, identifying, and applying some gospel truths related to the plan of salvation:

Teach the Plan #5: “What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of each of these illustrations of the plan of salvation? How do they help us better understand the plan of salvation?”

Teach the Plan #6: “How would you summarize the plan of salvation using five words or less?”

Activity: Give your children a game that they don’t know how to play. Tell them to start playing. When they make a move say, “No, you can’t do that,” but don’t tell them why or why not. When they become frustrated at not knowing the rules or understanding the point of the game, compare the game to our mortal life. Ask “How is this like what happens when you don’t understand the plan of salvation?”

Invitation to Act: Review the quotes by Joseph Smith and Elder Bruce R. McConkie near the Experiment upon the Word icon. Invite your children to ponder on how learning more about the plan of salvation can affect their daily actions and their personal happiness. Have them choose a chapter in this book that they will commit to study and apply its content.
Act I

Before We Came to Earth
Quick quiz! Don’t panic—it’s just true or false.

1. True or False: God is the father of the spirits of all mankind.

2. True or False: We had agency (the ability to choose) in the premortal existence.

3. True or False: Gender was an essential characteristic of who we were in the premortal existence.

4. True or False: There was no sin in the premortal existence.

5. True or False: Some people, like Cain or Judas, were foreordained in the premortal existence to do evil on earth.

(Note: The answers to this quiz are on page 18).

These next questions are a little tougher. Ready?

• “Where did I come from?”
• “Why I am here?”
• “Where am I going?”

These are three key questions about life that everybody needs answered. Throughout this book, we will address each one of those questions. This chapter will give some answers to the first one: where we came from. President Joseph F. Smith taught, “Where did we come from? From God. Our spirits existed before they came to this world. They were in the councils of the heavens before the foundations of the earth were laid. We were
there. We sang together with the heavenly hosts for joy when the foundations of the earth were laid, and when the plan of our existence upon this earth and redemption were mapped out. We were there.”

Can you remember what the premortal existence was like? We’re guessing that you probably can’t because of something called “the veil.” The veil makes it so that we cannot remember the things that happened before we were born on earth. But just as surely as we live now, we each lived then.

Our premortal existence lasted a long time—much, much longer than the mortal life we are now experiencing. Everyone on this earth actually lived for a very long time before they were ever born on earth. So, who were we in the premortal existence, and what did we do for all those uncountable years before we came to earth?

**We Were Born and Raised as Spirit Children of Heavenly Parents**

First of all, each of us was born and raised as a spirit child of Heavenly Parents. Each of us is literally a child of God, created, raised, and reared by our loving Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother in the premortal existence. Speaking to the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord said, “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee” (Jeremiah 1:5). Each of us, like Jeremiah, was known by God before we were born. In fact, President Ezra Taft Benson said, “Nothing is going to startle us more when we pass through the veil to the other side than to realize how well we know our Father and how familiar his face is to us.”

We sometimes forget we are eternal beings, the spirit offspring of God. As a son or daughter of a Heavenly King, we are each a prince or a princess. (Perhaps that’s why we love fairy tales so much! Deep down inside of our spirits, we all know we are royalty.) As God’s children, all of mankind has the potential to
be “heirs of God” (Romans 8:17). We were born of Greatness, and for greatness.

We Progressed Spiritually

One of the purposes of the premortal existence was to teach us about God’s plan and to develop our spiritual capacities. Just as we can grow and develop spiritually in our mortal lifetime, we progressed spiritually in many ways during our premortal existence. *True to the Faith* teaches, “Throughout your premortal life, you developed your identity and increased your spiritual capabilities. Blessed with the gift of agency, you made important decisions, such as the decision to follow Heavenly Father’s plan. These decisions affected your life then and now. You grew in intelligence and learned to love the truth, and you prepared to come to the earth, where you could continue to progress.”3

Speaking of “choice spirits who were reserved to come forth in the fulness of times” (people like you!), the Doctrine and Covenants states, “Even before they were born, they, with many others, received their first lessons in the world of spirits and were prepared to come forth in the due time of the Lord to labor in his vineyard for the salvation of the souls of men” (Doctrine and Covenants 138:53, 56). Based upon our agency and level of obedience to God’s laws, some increased more than others in spiritual knowledge, intelligence, and ability.4 As a result of how we developed, our Heavenly Father foreordained us to specific missions and responsibilities that needed
to be performed here on earth. (See chapter 4 for more on fo-
ordination.)

**We Developed Talents and Abilities**

Most of us have a talent that we are naturally good at or an
aptitude to which we seem inherently inclined. That could
have come through our DNA, but it also could have come
from our PMA (premortal abilities)! Elder Bruce R. McConkie
wrote:

> Being subject to law, and having their agency, all the spirits of
> men, while yet in the Eternal Presence [or premortal existence],
developed aptitudes, talents, capacities, and abilities of every sort,
kind, and degree. During the long expanse of life which then was,
an infinite variety of talents and abilities came into being. As the
ages rolled, no two spirits remained alike. Mozart became a musi-
cian; Einstein centered his interest in mathematics: Michelangelo
turned his attention to painting. Cain was a liar, a schemer, a rebel
who maintained a close affinity to Lucifer. Abraham and Moses
and all of the prophets sought and obtained the talent for spiri-
tuality. . . . The whole house of Israel, known and segregated out
from their fellows, was inclined toward spiritual things. . . .

. . . When we pass from preexistence to mortality, we bring
with us the traits and talents there developed.5

Some of what we are doing on earth now is putting the talents
and abilities we developed in the premortal existence to use. *For the
Strength of Youth* teaches us that we are “responsible for developing
the talents and abilities Heavenly Father has given [us].”6

**We Fought in the “War in Heaven”**

For those who are more prone to say, “I’m a lover, not a fighter,”
well, actually, in the premortal existence you loved God so much
you decided to be a fighter. One of the most important events that
happened in the premortal existence was what is commonly known as the War in Heaven (Revelation 12:7). (See chapter 3 for more on the War in Heaven.)

**We Looked Forward to Earth Life with Excitement**

What has been the greatest moment of your life? When you won the state championship? When you went on your first date? When you were chosen as the lead in the school play? When you finally found that missing sock? (Hallelujah!) All great moments to be sure, but not the greatest of your life. In fact, we have forgotten one of our greatest moments.

Elder Richard G. Scott taught: “One of the most exhilarating moments of your life—when you were filled with anticipation, excitement, and gratitude—you are not able to remember. That experience occurred in the premortal life when you were informed that finally your time had come to leave the spirit world to dwell on earth with a mortal body. You knew you could learn through personal experience the lessons that would bring happiness on earth, lessons that would eventually lead you to exaltation and eternal life as a glorified, celestial being in the presence of your Holy Father and His Beloved Son. . . . Oh, how you must have rejoiced with that prospect.”

The scriptures teach us that in the premortal existence we “sang together” and “shouted for joy” (Job 38:7) about our opportunity to come to earth and advance in the plan of salvation. We knew that mortal life wouldn’t be easy, but we looked forward to it.

President Spencer W. Kimball taught, “We understood well before we came to [earth] that there would be sorrows, disappointments, hard work, blood, sweat, and tears; but in spite of all, we looked down and saw this earth being made ready for us, and we said in effect, ‘Yes, Father, in spite of all those things I can see great blessings that could come to me as one of thy sons or daughters; in
taking a body I can see that I will eventually become immortal like thee, that I might overcome the effects of sin and be perfected, and so I am anxious to go to the earth at the first opportunity.’ And so we came.”

For thousands of years, God prepared us in the premortal existence to come here and to succeed in His plan of salvation. And we were excited to be born and have the opportunity to prove ourselves to Him and progress to become more like Him.

**Don’t Drop the Baton!**

In the 2008 Olympics, both the American men’s 4x100 meter relay team and the women’s team faced the same challenge: as the baton was passed from one runner to the next, a mistake was made and the baton was dropped. Because of this error, both American teams were disqualified.

Scan this QR code or visit http://delivr.com/1k78r to watch the women’s 4x100 meter relay race from the 2008 Olympics.

In a way we can consider life (from its eternal perspective) as a sort of relay race, only in this race we pass the baton to ourselves. We ran the first leg of the race in the premortal existence and successfully finished that portion of the test. We then passed the baton to ourselves here in mortality. We’ve all succeeded in the first part of the race. Let’s not drop the baton as we get ready to pass into the third and final leg of the race, immortality!
Have your own relay race where you practice passing a baton from one person to another. What makes for a successful handoff? How is this like the transition from our living in the premortal existence to our mortal life? How is it different?

One of the best things we can do to act on the truth of the premortal existence is to study the scriptures. Go to the Topical Guide and look up “Man, Antemortal Existence of.” The verses listed all describe the premortal existence. Look up the verses and mark the ones that are most meaningful to you.

Still Have Questions?

Could we sin in the premortal existence?

Alma 13:3 teaches that in the premortal existence we were “left to choose good or evil” (Alma 13:3). We each had our agency, and could therefore choose to follow God’s instructions, or to not. Doctrine and Covenants 93:38 says, “Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning; and God having redeemed man from the fall, men became again, in their infant state, innocent before God” (emphasis added). So when we began our premortal existence, we were all innocent. Notice that this verse says that when we were infants, we became innocent again, thus implying we weren't still innocent and had made some mistakes before we were born. This seems logical considering that a third part of God’s children decided to not follow God and instead chose to follow Satan (Doctrine and Covenants 29:36).
Answers to the quiz from page 11

1. True. Acts 17:29; Romans 8:16.
3. True. “Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.”
4. False. A third part of Heavenly Father’s children rebelled against God and His plan (Doctrine and Covenants 29:36; Moses 4:3).
5. False. “No person was foreordained or appointed to sin or to perform a mission of evil. . . . Cain was promised by the Lord that if he would do well, he would be accepted. Judas had his agency.”
Teach the Plan!

Our First Childhood

**Objective:** To help learners understand and appreciate the premortal existence and how it relates to their lives.

**Attention Getter:** Take the true or false quiz next to Teach the Plan #1.

**Quotation:** Read the quote by President Joseph F. Smith under Teach the Plan #2. Ask your children, “How does it affect your life to realize that you lived with God before you were born?”

**Discussion Question:** Discuss the text next to Teach the Plan #3, then ask your children: “What does it mean to you to know that you are born for greatness? How should that affect how you live?”

**Video:** Watch the video linked at Teach the Plan #4.

**Discussion Question:** After reading the quote by Elder Bruce R. McConkie next to Teach the Plan #5, ask your children, “What talents and traits do you think you brought to earth from the premortal existence?”

**Video:** Teach the Plan #6: Watch the video of the failed baton exchange at the Olympics and discuss the associated story.

**Activity:** Experiment upon the Word: Have a baton relay race, then ask the questions that accompany the activity.

**Invitation to Act:** Invite your children to act on the challenge offered at Live the Plan. A few days later, follow up with them on their study and invite them to share the verses they studied and marked.