

Chapter 15

THE PHELPS FAMILY

*P*helps was vigorously engaged at various stages of his life with printing, newspaper publishing, Anti-Masonry, and building the emerging Church of Christ. Yet, equally important to him throughout the immense ups and downs of his career paths were his wife and family. This is evident from frequent references over the years in his newspaper writings about home and family and their importance in crafting a life of integrity. Equally evident are Phelps's views about a husband's dominant role over his wife. While such views were common to that era in America and even in the church, they easily jar the sensibilities of the modern reader.

SIGNIFICANCE OF WILLIAM'S LETTERS TO SALLY

William's devotion to Sally and his children is never more obvious than in the collection of letters he wrote from Kirtland, Ohio, to Liberty, Missouri, in 1835 and 1836. Unabashedly, he poured out his feelings again and again in these letters. Clearly, he was committed to their welfare and to nurturing them in the paths of truth and the gospel. William often expressed feelings of affection toward Sally, and he urged her to express similar feelings back to him. His expressions to Sally even bordered on the obsessive. He felt compelled repeatedly and worriedly to write concerning her health and welfare and to counsel or even to chastise her in order to keep her in the right way as he defined it for her. He appeared to be jealous of her giving the slightest hint of praise toward any other man. William often wrote his letters with great passion late in the evening after other companions had retired to their beds. We learn much about William's personality, odd and dogmatic as it often was, through these letters.

These letters also provide insight into the evolution of the doctrine of eternal marriage and the relationships of the man, the woman, and the Lord that were being revealed

and developed by Joseph Smith and his coterie of leaders in Kirtland. This was a vital time in the church as its leaders prepared for their “endowment” of “power from on high” (D&C 105:11–12) and the general membership prepared the “house of the Lord” (D&C 84:31; 88:137) as a place of worship and revelation. We also learn of the church’s many accomplishments during this vital period through Phelps’s pithy observations.

Within this collection is only one extant letter written by Sally to William. He reported that he received a goodly number of letters from her, and he responded to many items that Sally had written to him. Sadly, however, only one of her letters has survived. It is illuminating regarding her personality and her perceived deficiencies. Sally likely felt intimidated by her husband’s superior intellectual abilities.

Unfortunately, other W. W. Phelps letters to his family from any other period before or after 1835 and 1836 are rare. His feelings, philosophy about family, and commitment to his loved ones at these other times presumably would be similar to those expressed in these informative letters.

When Phelps left most of his family behind in Liberty, Missouri, in April 1835, he and Sally had seven children: Sabrina, eighteen years of age; Mehitabel (or “Hitty”), fifteen; William Waterman (who went by Waterman), twelve; Sarah, nine; Henry Enon, six; James, two; and Lydia, one month. William and Sally had lost to death three babies: a boy (unnamed and stillborn) born after Sabrina; an infant daughter named Jerusha, born after Mehitabel; and an infant daughter named Mary, born after Henry. By this time Sabrina was semi-independent as a schoolteacher in Clay County. Waterman accompanied his father to Kirtland. During Phelps’s absence of nearly a year from his five other children, each of them obviously grew in stature and experienced significant changes in their lives.

MAY, JUNE, AND JULY LETTERS

William’s first extant letter to Sally is dated May 26, 1835.¹ By the twenty-sixth, Phelps had started his work on preparing the new Doctrine and Covenants for publication. He began his letter thus: “My Dear Sally—Accept from your best friend, even one that always remembers you not only in heart, but in prayer before God, the Six first forms of the Doctrines and Covenants of Christ’s church of Latter day Saints, as a token of his affection for you.” He added that he intended to continue to send her installments of the page proofs. Then he admonished in spiritual terms: “Be faithful Sally; for the reward of such, you know, is greater in the kingdom of our Father. Nothing but the hope and certainty of the glory that I shall receive, when the Lord comes, or before, when Zion is redeemed, could persuade me to live away from my beloved wife and family.”²

William desired to provide spiritual uplift to his family while absent from them. “I shall give you whatever new thing comes to head,” he wrote, “for you know I always love to gratify you with choice things from the Lord: that you may increase in knowledge, and teach the children the great way of heaven, that they also may be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”³ Then in this letter he sprang on her one of these “choice things from the Lord”—that he and Sally would “be one in the Lord throughout

eternity” if they, as a married couple, “continue faithful to the end.”⁴ In future letters to Sally, William repeatedly reminded her that they belonged together in the Lord, albeit completely under his direction and not in an equal partnership.

In this same letter, William urged Sally to sit down as often as she thought best to “write me a good letter that I shall not be ashamed to show to the brethren. They will like you the better and so shall I.” He also requested that the children write. He mentioned favorably how well their son Waterman was doing in Kirtland.⁵ We have no extant letters from any of their children written to William from Liberty, although we have two letters from Waterman back to his mother that were included in letters that William sent.

William concluded this May 26 letter to Sally as follows: “Do not forfeit your birth right. I shall receive my blessing from the patriarch soon and if there is any thing in it worthy, I will write you a copy. Give my warm love and gratitude to all the saints in the regions of Zion for there is nothing nearer my heart, than the redemption of Zion, the prosperity of the Saints, and comfort of my wife and family.”⁶

Phelps wrote another poignant letter of instruction to his wife on June 2. It shows not only how much he missed her and the children but also that other brethren from Missouri who had similarly left for the East were in the same situation. The letter also demonstrates that Phelps already fully knew that all who would enter the House of the Lord in Kirtland when finished needed to be pure before God in their relationships with their fellow beings, especially so with members of their families. The following quotation from his letter is long but is cited here to reveal his feelings about his wife and family life. It also shows the directive language he was wont to use with Sally.

Language has not the power to convey my mind to you; nor can those who are not separated for months and years, feel for those who are:—How sweet will be the meeting of those Elders, and High prests, who, to fulfil their prom[i]ses and commissions, and help save souls, after months’ and years’ absence, from their beloved wives and families, return to enjoy their smiles and company!—O how well, we who have left our wives and children will know how to prize their delightful society! How often will our wives reflect on the happy moments they passed by their fire-sides, with their husbands and children! How many times will they long for such happy times again! *Now is the time for our affections to feast on the perfections and virtues of each other; to be sure, we may have had some little differences about some things when we were together, but they are all buried now:* And if any persons under heaven ought to enjoy the blessings prepared for the saints when Zion is redeemed—it is those husbands and wives that freely, and faithfully bear separation for the sake of the Kingdom; for the sake of religion; and for the sake of souls! What though, my dear Sally, can not hear her children—exclaim, as when I was there, “There comes father!” “father said so,” and “I will ask father.” &c What though my flute is not heard morning and evening—and what though my voice is not heard in reading and praying—I have confidence in you, and know that you will do right and teach the children to do so too. *Live humble; pray much, for I pray for you once a day in secret, and I am confident, <if> you and the children “do likewise”, that our prayers will be answered:—for the Lord says what ever thi[n]g ye ask which is expedient, being*

united, it shall be granted. Seek diligently to preserve the faith <which> has been delivered unto [us] in these last days; Forgive all that trespass against you: pray for your brethren and friends—and revile not against your enemies—Inasmuch as you have strength and <are> prospered in your labors or undertaking, clothe your selves decently; for this <is> comely in the sight of God, and honorable before your brethren and the world. I shall do all I can for you, though the brethren here are considerably in debt, and are poor. The children! the children! *Sally, teach them diligently the holy precepts which you have had taught you from the book of Mormon, the bible, the revelations, &c. Let them take turns in praying. . . .* Since we were married, I have never known her do wrong knowingly, therefore strive to have the children brought up in the way they should go.⁷

The first letter from Sally in Liberty, as well as letters from the two oldest daughters, Sabrina and Mehitabel, to William in Kirtland evidently arrived July 18, 1835, for on July 19 William wrote, “Last evening we received your first letter after an absence of twelve weeks and twelve hours.” Clearly he was immensely homesick for her and the children. “Our tears of joy [referring perhaps to the like feelings of his partners in the presidency who had a chance to read the letter] were the witness of its welcome reception.” He noted that “Brother Joseph [Smith] remarked that it was as easy to shed tears while reading that letter as it was when reading the history of Joseph in Egypt,” who too had been apart from his family for a long time.⁸

William continued in this lengthy letter: “My affection for you and my children grows very fast. I mean it grows purer and more ardent.” He urged Sally to have Sarah, who had just turned ten, baptized. Regarding the younger children, he added: “Sarah, Henry, James and Lydia—I must wait to see them a good while yet. They have my tears and mother’s smiles till I come, with the blessings of the Lord. . . . I hope and pray that the children will be diligent and learn well this summer.”⁹

Phelps expressed concern about his family’s decaying housing circumstances in Liberty. “You say that the roof of the house leaks,” he wrote. “I have written to have another good roof put on over the one now on. You can get 12 penny nails out of the goods at Brother [John] Corroll’s [member of the Zion bishopric who would also soon go to Kirtland]; and anything else that you actually need that is among those goods, get and use and I will settle the matter.” He added that he was sorry to learn that the cupboard had fallen down because he had forgotten to nail it. He suggested to Sally that if she could not get sufficient crockery at Corroll’s storehouse, she could go into Liberty Village and “replenish it.”¹⁰

Naturally sensing how difficult it must be for William and Sally to be apart, Joseph Smith added a note in his own handwriting to Sally in the same letter. “My intention is to give you a word of consolation to streng[th]en you in the absence of your most worthy Companion, and—husband,” he wrote. “I consider in some degree how great a trial you must have in this seperation, but I think I may safely say, that you may rest with a firm reliance that God will so order it that you may not be seperated only but for a short season, and then <your Joy will be full>.” The Prophet also promised that Sally’s husband

would “teach you things that have been hid from the wise and prudent, hid[d]en things of old times. . . . Some of the[se] things have begun [to] come forth.”¹¹

In the same letter the Prophet complimented his close friend Phelps. Even though Joseph on various occasions discovered weaknesses in him and even rebuked him for some of them, he always maintained a fond affection for him. In this letter to Sally, Joseph wrote, “[Your] husband whose Merits and experiance and acquirements, but few can compete with in this generation and fewer I fear will ever appreciate the worth of such men; men upon whom God, in his wi[s]dom hath bestowed gifts, that duly qualify them to lead men in the way of life and salvation.”¹²

SALLY’S LETTER TO WILLIAM

The single extant letter from Sally to William that has come down to us is dated July 29, 1835. It demonstrates a lack of self-confidence, particularly when she compared her writing to that of her husband. It also shows that she had not mastered English spelling and grammar as had William. Following are extracts from her letter that indicate some significant news items that she desired to pass on:

Dear Husband

I sit down to write the third leter to you and let you know that we are all well but james has got the ague [“the ague” that people generally referred to during that period is thought to be malaria in today’s definition] and I hop thes few lins will find you in joying the same blessing feeling ansxious to hear from you and to let you know that james is sick and to let you know that I can write a little not with standing you was all most made with your self to think that you did not makeme write more when you was at home. I think you will feel difrent when you git my letters if you can read them ifind that ican write but it is hard worke for me to write you know that I never practice mch I have had all ways something else to do if could write as well as you can it would not be such taske for me Igit tird sometimes almost to think that I cannot write no letter for won will come in and say you are going to write oftin ner to Father all the time Igit. Is anights I have so much worke adays to do the Children goe to school, they Learn very well Sarah and Henry they are atrying to Learn their Books So that will bein on to some more. Sabrina is adoining very well in her chool [Sabrina was a teacher] thay want her to keep sixmonths I git along way well so far Ihave Som troubles but with the help of the Lord igitalong with them I try to do the best that I can so that imay inherit the blessing that was preparad four the richous and to set example before the children and Brethren that it may be worthy to imitatide I can say that you and Waterman have menny prayers put up to the Lord that he will bless you and preserve tht you may return home to you family and in joy their socity again. . . . I think Little Lydia groos fat and plenty she sets alone jaimes groos poor he has bin sic a weaik or more he say tell Father iam sick Sarah has bin baptized. . . . Tell Waterman hemust remember his Sisters and Brothers and Mother Ido not think of anny more so must Close my leter my the Lord bewith youI and so remain your Sally Phelps.¹³

AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER LETTERS

On August 14, Williams wrote Sally a lengthy letter that focused on rearing their children in righteous ways. He indicated that for every child that Sally bore and then kept in the kingdom of God she would have a star added to her crown. He continued:

Babies are always in the Kingdom until they transgress when they have come to years of accountability. Well might the Psalmist exclaim: "Lo children are the heritage of God." How necessary, then, that every pain be taken, and every means used to keep them in the Kingdom; and to obey the requisitions of the Gospel that parents may come into the presence of God and bring all their sheaves with them; for all their pain, then, they will receive joy; for all the sorrow, pleasure; for all the tribulations, blessings; and for all their children, "stars."

William concluded his thought: "Hence I entreat you with all the affection I have for you and 'our' children to keep them in the way they should go, that all of us may come in to the bliss of God together, with songs of everlasting joy."¹⁴

Realizing that their absence from each other made it difficult for Sally to rear the children in correct paths, William wrote, "I know the task of training up children right before the Lord is too much for a woman, and was I not confident of your virtue and capability, I should feel very uneasy." Thus he added, "But your piety and prudence is well known to me, that I know you will do all in your power to gratify my feelings in bringing up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord: to be obedient, to be wise, to be good, and to be pure in heart."¹⁵

Phelps reminded his wife that though they may be equal to each other in God's sight, he, the husband, had the "power and authority" and that Sally would "participate in my glory." If Sally were to "labor for the Lord" as Phelps directed, she would "be great with me and great with God." He emphasized, "Do so, Sally, for your sake, and for my sake, and for Jesus' sake."¹⁶ Given events in the church in the next several decades and how men would speak of relations with wives in plural marriage, it is probable that other leading brethren in Kirtland felt the same way as Phelps did.

Phelps then referenced the oldest daughters, Sabrina and Mehitabel. They "are in the right age to be light, and vain," he observed, "when the current of vice and folly can easily overflow." So he admonished Sally: "Be strict with them, even as I, and you will keep them in the Kingdom as ornaments of your love and glory."¹⁷

He ended this lengthy letter of strict counsel by stating that while "others may do as they may," as for the Phelpses, they would serve the Lord. He indicated to his wife that if she lacked wisdom in any particular, she should write him and he would give any knowledge back to her that he could. He then implored, "Forget not your prayers in the season thereof, nor let the children forget theirs. Pray for me daily, for so I do for you three or four times a day. Pray for health, peace, and our dwelling together in unity."¹⁸

Evidently, William felt that Sally was displeased with him for some reason, because he added the following poignant words to the outside of the envelope for this August 14 letter: "Sally—lest anything should be wrong, I asked your forgiveness on all things

passed. But you have not written a word about it. Why? Tell 'little innocent Lydia' her father longs to see her, and all the rest of the children, not omitting her mother—for her 'satisfaction.'"¹⁹

Also on the outside of the letter, Phelps's close friend and immediate co-laborer, Oliver Cowdery, wrote a note of consolation to Sally. "Your husband has written you of his health," he noted. "It is proper to say that he is doing well, and I bear this testimony concerning him, that he is humble and faithful. Next spring [of 1836] you may expect him, if all be well. Waterman does well." Cowdery, who along with Phelps had heard Joseph Smith expand on doctrinal themes, reflected somewhat on spiritual highlights when he added the following to his note: "Great things await the earth, and great joys await the Saints. Soon the Son of Man comes, and then righteous families will no more be separated. I bless the Lord for that. The Lord bless you and all the faithful, even more than your hearts can premeditate. Thus shall it be."²⁰

The next extant letter is dated September 9, 1835. Phelps addressed Sally as "Beloved in the Lord." Phelps indicated that he and the other church leaders had a few days earlier sent instructions to the elders in Missouri. Thinking still of how his and Sally's example might help the other families in Missouri, Phelps wrote, "Inasmuch as you submit unto my teachings and commands, as unto the Lord, others seeing your submission, your meekness, and virtuous example, if they mean to be among the saints, 'will go and do likewise.'"²¹

Phelps considered this letter to his "beloved" to be one of spiritual guidance. "I have it in my heart to give you a little instruction," he wrote, "so that you may know your place, and stand in it, beloved, admired, and rewarded, *in time and in eternity*."²² This may be the first occasion where "*in time and in eternity*," a common phrase in modern Latter-day Saint parlance, was recorded in the infant church. We can see that the Prophet Joseph Smith was eager to share revelatory insights he had received.

In this lengthy letter of "instruction," Phelps turned first to explaining the role of a man in God's plan. This subject evidently had been one of important discussion among Joseph Smith and the Kirtland brethren. "Man was created in the beginning to dress the earth to multiply his species; to honor God, and enjoy his presence forever. Hence it is the duty of man to labor for his living; to provide for his own household; to cultivate the land; to beautify it, to rear up habitations, and to have dominion over all animals which were made for his use and benefit."²³

Phelps turned to talking about the role of a woman in God's eternal plan: "But it is not good that man should live alone, therefore it is pleasing to the Lord, that he should have an helpmeet, and multiply and replenish the earth, raising up seed, that the earth may be filled with its measure of man."²⁴ Present-day Latter-day Saints will recognize that the doctrine of "the man, the woman, and the Lord" that emerged over time in the church, the gospel, and temple worship was in its creative stages in 1835. Phelps's attitudes were common to his era, although presumably not all Mormon men were as dogmatic as he was.

Phelps then took to interpreting scripture from the New Testament: "In the first chapter of Romans, beginning at the 26 verse, see what abominations women and men

work by changing the order of heaven." He likely was referring to some women assuming the lead over men in society and the consequences arising therefrom. "One reason why the generations of men have been more or less cursed, with harlots, whoremonger, adulterers, maimed children, ungodly wretches, &C. God gives them up to their own vile affections. This you know is the fact with men and women in general among the gentiles."²⁵

William definitely wanted to be sure that Sally understood this relationship of God and man and woman because he waxed vigorously on the subject: "In the 11th chapter of first Corinthians, you will see that the head of Christ is God; and the head of man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and that the woman was created for the man." He told Sally that he could cite many like passages from scripture. "God placed man upon earth to do his will and it is his will that the earth should be filled with its measure of man." Further, "*Now you know that man was placed at the head of creations next to the Lord; and the Woman is next to the man, bone of his bone. If man honors the Lord, he will obey his commandments; if woman honors her husband she will obey his commandments, and thus the order of heaven is followed on earth.*" Phelps indicated that by obeying this divine order, everyone—the man, the woman, and the children—would be blessed and peace would reign.²⁶

William inserted in this letter his confidence in Sally because she had already complied with these principles by not murmuring when she willingly brought "our little innocent Lydia" into the world. He was pleased that Sally "did the will of the Lord" in this.²⁷ Perhaps there had been discussion between them as to whether there should be any further children, but in the end Sally submitted to her husband's will in having this child, and, in Phelps's view, they were unitedly blessed as a result.

Coincidentally, on the same day that Phelps wrote the above letter to Sally, he received a letter from her—her fourth, as he identified it. It had been posted nineteen days earlier, Phelps observed. "You have no idea how much Joy your letters give me: and those who read them are pleased with them," he wrote. "Your Spirit comes modestly in your ideas, and it gives me great consolation in my absence from you."²⁸

The promised endowment must have borne heavily on Phelps's mind at this time, because he said to Sally: "I expect an endowment, I labor to forgive and be forgiven. I have said so in my letters to you and I think you have forgotten to mention it in your letters. If you and I tarry together on earth, and to go the Lord together, we 'must be one.'" He emphasized to his wife, "I know that no man on earth thinks more of his wife than I do of you. I do not conceal it, nor never did." He then pleaded, "I love you and I want you to love me and write to me that you do. I love to please you, and I want you should love to please me, and say so in your letters."²⁹

Phelps was also excited again to receive another letter from their oldest daughter, Sabrina. He added, "The souls of our children, Sally, are of great worth; don't let them be lost if in your power to prevent it. I love our children and love to have them brought up right. May God assist to do it. . . . Sally and children remember him whose voice you can not hear, but whose words speak to you."³⁰

William and Sally apparently had communicated with each other somewhat about Sally's siblings, because he referred to them twice in this letter. Sally had contemplated going to Ohio to visit her husband and son as well as members of her Waterman family who also lived in Ohio, albeit not in Kirtland. Phelps chastised her for this wish and said that such a trip would be impractical. He noted, "As soon as I hear from any of your folks I shall write."³¹ Phelps made good on this promise in a letter dated December 8, 1835. He reported that he had learned from US postal authorities that Sally's sister Lydia Brewster (her married name) had moved to Indiana to property owned by her husband.³² In a later letter written in January 1836, Phelps again referred to the Waterman family. He reported that Elder Libbeus Coons of the First Quorum of the Seventy had just returned from a mission where he had met up with Lydia and that Lydia was contemplating being baptized into the church. Phelps wrote, "I have written a letter to her [Lydia] and when I get the answer, I will write you the particulars. I feel confident that I shall get her into the church thus Sally can rejoice that she has some own blood besides her own in the Kingdom. I shall try hard to have all your brothers and sisters brought in."³³ No specific documentation on any of the Watermans joining the Mormons is known.

INSTRUCTION ON HUSBAND-WIFE RELATIONS

Less than a week after his September 11 letter, Phelps wrote an exceptionally long letter to Sally, whom he addressed as "MY ONLY ONE." He granted that it was a privilege to live at the home of Joseph Smith and to be around the "preaching, teaching, and information from all the elders." This gave him a better opportunity, he indicated to Sally, to "gain knowledge" for her benefit and for that of all the Saints. Thus he intended to write another epistle "to admonish for goodness." In it he remarked, "The cause we have espoused is God's; the religion we profess is Christ's and we are not of this world but of the world to come." It behooved him and Sally to "obey the commandments of the Lord, and please him to entitle us to an inheritance in the holy city that shall come down from heaven adorned as a bride for her husband."³⁴ Because he worried that Sally had not fully comprehended his instructions concerning the respective roles of men and women, he would write in this letter further explanations. Phelps's ardent intent is obvious from these words that seem to jump from his pen:

Mark what I have said to you, or asked of you and do it and great shall be you reward. . . . For the man is not without the woman neither is the woman without the man in the Lord. I wish you to read the seventh of I Corinthians and learn for yourself: In Ephesians and Colossians it says—"Wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands as unto the Lord." *That is keep your husband's commands in all things as you do the Lord's. Your husband is your head, and the Lord is his head.* Br. Joseph has preached some of his greatest sermons on the duty of wives to their husbands and the rule of all women I ever heard. I would not have you ignorant, Sally, of the mystery of Men and Women, but I can not write all.

He also wanted to clarify something else that he considered very important. A letter from Sally, as he reported it, had ended with “I remain yours till death.” Instead, she should have used the word “forever,” Phelps wrote, because if they remained faithful, “you will be mine in this world and in the world to come.”³⁵

Even though Phelps referenced Joseph Smith as a source for these ideas on men and women and the Lord, it cannot be concluded that Smith was as firm in laying down the law as was Phelps. Throughout his ministry, the Prophet appeared to be more conciliatory in his admonitions to women than Phelps appeared to be in his letters to Sally. Indeed, we read in Smith’s matrimonial teachings for this period that he addressed the duties of husbands and wives *to each other*.³⁶ Phelps’s relationship with his wife was based on a complex reflection of Smith’s new teachings on eternal marriage, American cultural values at the time concerning women, his strict and puritanical nature, his zealousness, and his interpretation of the Apostle Paul’s teachings on husband-wife relations.

Not only did Phelps in this letter repeatedly charge Sally to obey him, but he also used the metaphor applied by Paul in the New Testament of how Christ loved the church compared to how a husband should love his wife. Phelps said he was willing “to lay down his life for her, if necessary.” He indicated that the reason he called her “my only one” at the beginning of the letter is that “I have no right to any other woman in this world nor in the world to come, according to the law of the celestial kingdom. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection.”³⁷

The Apostle Paul’s teachings were given in the first century of the Common Era and were based, at least in part, on then-existing cultural conditions. Nevertheless, Phelps was willing to apply Paul’s teachings literally:

If you read the 11th chapter of first Corinthians, you may find some good instruction: In old times honest women veiled their faces in public; especially as is mentioned in the 10th verse of this chapter “because of the angels” they probably formed veils then of their hair. I think when I return that my women [his wife and daughters] will generally vail [*sic*] their faces in public and give no one a chance to gaze upon what is not his. This modest way will not lead to temptation, and may be one means of promoting virtue.³⁸

Significantly, Joseph Smith neither made such an edict nor even suggested anything near the same in his many discourses and writings.

“I should hate to have to chasten you,” Phelps continued, “but as I love you, *so I will chasten you, if you step aside from what I require*, and what I know is the will of the Lord.” He then specifically directed Sally: “You must not tattle; you must not find fault; you must not be proud; you must not be exalted; you must not speak evil of your neighbor; no; no; Sally, do none of these things, but the pure in heart, and you shall be sure of Zion, and me.” Phelps was writing these things, he assumed, not just for Sally’s sake, but for others in Clay County, Missouri, who may read the letter, for he noted, “This instruction is good; I want every saint to follow it.”³⁹ One might wonder if she was embarrassed as she shared this strict instruction with others—or if she even shared it at all.

Surely, Phelps was sincere in his desire for Sally and his children to be pure in heart and behavior and for the Missouri Saints to adhere to gospel principles. Intermingled in this letter were expressions concerning the redemption of Zion and becoming clean and pure as a people in order to be worthy of the Lord's blessings, particularly as they awaited the forthcoming endowment. He wrote about the monies he sent Sally and worried if she would have enough to care for herself and the children during the coming winter. He could not restrain himself from showing various emotions.

Look around you, Sally.—who fills your husband's place in God, to talk and converse of all that is near and dear to you; and play with little Lydia? Who fill his chair by the fireside, to instruct and explain? Who fills his place at table? Who sounds his notes to praise the Lord? Yea, Sally, and how many sisters equally good as you, are in the same condition, while their husbands are away to sound the alarm of the approaching end? And what man takes time when others sleep to write to his wife and the saints weekly, except me? O, if you and the saints knew how my heart burned for your welfare, how many times I pray for you, and how many tears I shed for you; (you all, I mean) I think you would be humble and rejoice.⁴⁰

Phelps ended this multipage, and likely tearstained, letter thus:

Write in your own meek and simple way just as it is, and whenever you want a "good word" to yourself and don't forget to write me "some good words" for I am flesh and blood, the very same as you, and love a little consolation once and awhile, seeing I cannot see you and the children's faces and hear you talk and pray morning and evening, nor watch "little innocent Lydia" sit and play. Forever W. W. Phelps⁴¹

OCTOBER, NOVEMBER, AND DECEMBER LETTERS

No extant letters exist from Phelps to Sally for another month, not until October 7, 1835. And this letter reveals a shocking development. After waiting, likely very impatiently, for four weeks for another letter from Sally, Phelps learned through another letter from Missouri that severe sickness had come upon Sally and some of the children. It was "the ague," a condition of a high fever accompanied by alternating cold and hot fits. It was likely malaria brought on, unbeknownst to society at that time, from mosquitoes arising out of the swamps and ponds. As he wrote, Phelps alternated from being deeply saddened about the present sad lot of his wife and family to being annoyed that Sally had not at least sent news of this through some of their friends who might have written letters. "The post office was instituted expressly to carry letters," he noted bitinglly.⁴² Certainly, it was hard for him to feel so helpless when he wanted to do his duty as husband and father in caring for his family's needs in their straits.

The extant letters from William to Sally in October and November did not deal with personal or family issues, but rather they contained information and admonition that were obviously directed to the Saints in Missouri. Phelps also began a journal in mid-November that he continued through mid-December. This journal revealed that Phelps

continued to write Sally and that he often dreamed of her and his family. He recorded that in one of the dreams he had seen Sally in a new, beautiful black frock.⁴³

In this daily journal that lasted for about a month and then was sent by mail to Sally, Phelps recorded some short moral statements or proverbs that presumably came from his own mind and heart and that he wished to pass on to his beloved wife. Likely, they were also meant to remind himself of his commitment to be righteous in thought and deed as he prepared for the coming promised endowment. Each statement was to stand alone.

- He that acts wisely at all times is truly a great man.
- Rash deeds often bring leisure repentance.
- He that speaks seldom, offends less than he that speaks much.
- Be with the Lord in Spirit, and the Lord will be with thee.
- Never meditate evil against thy neighbor, lest thou be paid in calamity.
- Never promise more than you can perform lest you disappoint some one that may rise up and rend you.
- Be good for the sake of eternal life, not because men praise virtue.
- He that shrinks from the Justice of God in this world, may naturally fall by Judgment in the world to come.
- Never trifle with sacred things, but be steady minded.
- Poverty and sickness are descendants of pride; to escape these dreadful estates, live according to the “words of wisdom.”
- To live happy, live holy.
- The greatest blessing parents can leave behind them on earth, is posterity—following after them in holiness to glorify God.
- Be familiar with thine “only one:” & deal treacherously with none.
- When you see one in a passion, check him with pleasant words, because water is better than wood to quench fire.
- Be ever ready to die, or live, and you will never be disappointed.
- Three things we should love with all our might; Our God; our Country, and our rights.
- There are three things that happify & sweeten life: religion, learning, and a virtuous wife.
- A plain heart is above a private one, and knowledge is far preferable to gold.
- A little in peace affords more Joy than abundance in trouble.
- Good advice, like a shower after a dry time is cheering.⁴⁴

Phelps ended this journal on December 18 after he received what he enumerated “Sally’s 7th letter.” In response to hers, he wrote again voluminously. He began, “The news that you are all well is delightful. And what you have written that is wrong, I forgive. Though If you disdain my ‘praise,’ I should like to know how you will endure the Lord’s Glory?” Sally had evidently promised to tell her feelings to her husband “by word of mouth” when they would see each other again. “Where is your assurance that you will ever

hear my voice again? Pause for a moment and hearken to him who has sent you money and clothes and prayer with all his heart.”⁴⁵

“My anxiety for your welfare is inexpressible,” he poignantly emphasized. “Fires are to be made; wood to be split; cows to feed; milking to be done; corn and potatoes to be saved for next summer; children to be taught.” Phelps figured that these were his duties and that they “run through my mind by day and by night.” But, he concluded, “I trust in the Lord, however, that you will do all that is needed, and so I am reconciled to be patient until I return to my family post again.”⁴⁶

Phelps reported that he and Waterman were well in spite of harsh weather they were enduring. “I am, since winter commenced, getting back to my common heft. I guess I am not more than 3 or 4 pounds more than 135 pounds.” In contrast to his own slimness, he reported that John Corrill and a number of the other brethren had become “pussy,” a word at that time that connoted obesity.⁴⁷

Phelps continued to pray that the time would be short before he would see his family again. “I have been absent so long now that I cannot tell how pretty, little, precious Lydia looks, and the rest of the children are strangers to my eyes; but as I dream of you so often I fancy you have not altered much.” Yet Phelps knew that his pressing business in Kirtland might delay his return to his family. “Don’t reckon too much on my coming home in the spring! It may be a little after before you see me. Keep up your faith and pray for the endowment; as soon as that takes place the elders [from Missouri] will anxiously speed for their families.” He ended with these words of faith of his own: “Now may the blessings, love and grace of our Lord and Savior be and abide with the Saints, and my only one, and little ones, forever, W. W. Phelps.”⁴⁸

1836 LETTERS

Phelps’s next extant letter to Sally is dated January 5, 1836. Phelps had noted in his previous letters that in Kirtland he had attended what he termed “feasts” associated with cardinal events such as “blessing meetings” and solemnized marriages. He proposed that his family in Liberty have a feast. “I want Little Lydia should be honored in my absence with a birthday family feast: The best you can get. Therefore on Monday the 14th day of March [the day before her first birthday] treat her and make a feast to the Lord for her good, and pass the day in a sacred prayerful manner.” He indicated that he was not trying to set a precedent. “But I want our youngest child honored before God, that she may grow up without sin; and whenever the Lord shall grant my return then all our children shall be honored with a feast before the Lord.”⁴⁹

In this same letter, Phelps exposed feelings of jealousy. “You say to me ‘don’t praise you,’” he wrote, “and then you praise Br. Littlefield [a close friend of the Phelpses living in Liberty]. A virtuous wife should not praise other men in the absence of her husband. All I want is that you should do so no more.” He insisted that she write that she was sorry for this. He followed with more strict advice: “Now, Sally, in the name of the Lord Jesus, be admonished to let alone other folks business; forgive them if they are where you can not see them face to face. Don’t praise other men to your own hurt. . . . Don’t be so studiously

careful in your letters to avoid saying anything in my favor or of showing a little more love for me than the rest of the world.”⁵⁰

In another January letter, Phelps noted that Thomas Marsh’s wife had sent him some rhyming verse in a letter. This prompted Phelps to suggest: “I wonder if you cannot pray to the Lord for the Spirit of poetry, and ‘Singing,’ and give me a little specimen of a ‘poetess’ in my absence, and a fine sample of ‘sweet singer’ when I return.”⁵¹

The bulk of Phelps’s letters to Sally from January to April 1836 dealt with the completion of the house of the Lord, the preparation for the endowment, and the ensuing promised outpouring of God’s Spirit upon the Saints in the events leading up to and including the dedication of the temple. He urged Sally to pray for the endowment and all the blessings associated with it. With passion he wrote her: “I pray the Lord to forgive me of all my iniquities and I want my brethren to forgive me and even my wife must have nothing against me. How can I receive an endowment if my skirts are not clean from the blood of this generation?”⁵²

ANALYSIS OF THE PHELPS FAMILY RELATIONS

William W. Phelps obviously loved Sally and his children with all his heart and was devoted to their happiness and advancement in the kingdom of God. Yet he was absolutely adamant that the husband was to rule in the family and that the wife and children were expected to observe total fealty to his commands, which he believed were based on guidance he received from God. He felt safe in his feelings because he could quote from the Apostle Paul’s New Testament admonitions.

Sally Phelps returned her devotion to William. She sacrificed immensely to rear her children in Liberty in shabby conditions. She allowed herself to remain in the roles women had in that generation.

It may be easy for those in the twenty-first century to condemn men like Phelps for his obvious feelings that men should lead women in society and in the church. But that is a manifestation of “presentism,” which is defined as “uncritical adherence to present-day attitudes, especially the tendency to interpret past events in terms of modern values and concepts.”⁵³ Phelps’s attitudes are extreme according to present-day values, but he was closer to the mainstream for his day.

A prominent historian of men-women relationships in early nineteenth-century America observed that “women were delegated a great moral responsibility by American men” to (1) keep order in the home because men were otherwise engaged in building up society and (2) be the “protectors of morals” in the ever-improving civilization.⁵⁴ In another study of women in the nineteenth century, men were described with the following adjectives: powerful, active, brave, rational, independent, and ambitious, and their designated sphere was “public.” In contrast, adjectives to describe women included weak, passive, domestic, illogical, emotional, and pure, and their designated sphere was “private.”⁵⁵ Phelps’s letters to Sally reflect nearly exactly these historical observations about men-women relationships of that era. He continued to write and publish in Nauvoo and Utah his attitudes regarding the roles of men, women, and children in family settings. His

attitudes about the superiority of men and in their making decisions for their wives are also evident in his plural marriages. These will be noted in later chapters herein.

Owing to the many extant 1835–36 letters from Phelps to his wife, those who study his life generations after him are rewarded with fascinating glimpses into his family and his devotion to his wife and children, as well as his attitudes about family roles, unity, and conduct during that time. Although we have much less access to such details for subsequent years, other sources utilized in the chapters that follow help us learn more of the family dynamics in the Phelps household.

NOTES

1. According to a diary entry, Phelps had written Sally on May 18, just two days after arriving in Kirtland, but this letter has not survived. *W. W. Phelps Diary*, May 18, 1835, MS 21921, CHL.
2. *WWPP*, May 26, 1835; underlining in original.
3. *WWPP*, May 26, 1835.
4. *WWPP*, May 26, 1835; *WWPL*, May 26, 1835, 550. This statement is discussed in chapter 14.
5. *WWPP*, May 26, 1835.
6. *WWPP*, May 26, 1835.
7. *JSP*, D4:334–35; emphasis added. This portion of the June 2, 1835, letter does not appear in *WWPL* or *WWPP*.
8. *WWPL*, July 19–20, 1835, 554–55.
9. *WWPL*, July 19–20, 1835, 555.
10. *WWPL*, July 19–20, 1835, 555.
11. *JSP*, D4:370–71; *PWJS*, 360–61.
12. *JSP*, D4:370; *PWJS*, 360.
13. *WWPP*, July 29, 1835.
14. *WWPL*, August 14, 1835, 557, 559; underlining in original.
15. *WWPL*, August 14, 1835, 559.
16. *WWPL*, August 14, 1835, 559.
17. *WWPL*, August 14, 1835, 559.
18. *WWPL*, August 14, 1835, 559.
19. *WWPL*, August 14, 1835, 559.
20. *WWPL*, August 14, 1835, 560.
21. *WWPL*, September 9, 1835, 560; *WWPP*, September 9, 1835.
22. *WWPL*, September 9, 1835, 561; *WWPP*, September 9, 1835; emphasis added.
23. *WWPL*, September 9, 1835, 561; *WWPP*, September 9, 1835.
24. *WWPL*, September 9, 1835, 561; *WWPP*, September 9, 1835.
25. *WWPL*, September 9, 1835, 561; *WWPP*, September 9, 1835; underlining in original.
26. *WWPL*, September 9, 1835, 561–62; *WWPP*, September 9, 1835; emphasis added.
27. *WWPL*, September 9, 1835, 561; *WWPP*, September 9, 1835; underlining in original.
28. *WWPL*, September 11, 1835, 562; *WWPP*, September 11, 1835.

29. WWPL, September 11, 1835, 562; WWPP, September 11, 1835; underlining in original.
30. WWPL, September 11, 1835, 563; WWPP, September 11, 1835; underlining in original.
31. WWPL, September 11, 1835, 562–63; WWPP, September 11, 1835.
32. WWPP, December 8, 1835.
33. WWPL, January 1836, 577, 577nn148–49; WWPP, January 1836.
34. WWPL, September 16, 1835, 563.
35. WWPL, September 16, 1835, 563–64; underlining in original, italic emphasis added.
36. See *JSP, J1*:110, 121, 153; *JSP, H1*:133, 145, 175.
37. WWPL, September 16, 1835, 564.
38. WWPL, September 16, 1835, 564; underlining in original.
39. WWPL, September 16, 1835, 564–65; underlining in original, italic emphasis added.
40. WWPL, September 16, 1835, 565; underlining in original.
41. WWPL, September 16, 1835, 566.
42. WWPL, October 7, 1835, 567; WWPP, October 7, 1835.
43. WWPP, October and November 1835.
44. WWPP, October and November 1835.
45. WWPP, December 18, 1835; underlining in original.
46. WWPL, December 18, 1835, 569.
47. WWPL, December 18, 1835, 569–70.
48. WWPL, December 18, 1835, 569–71; underlining in original.
49. WWPL, January 5, 1836, 572; WWPP, January 5, 1836.
50. WWPL, January 5, 1836, 573; underlining in original.
51. WWPL, January 1836, 577; WWPP, January 1836.
52. WWPL, January 1836, 578; WWPP, January 1836; underlining in original. The solemn events associated with the endowment will be discussed in chapter 18.
53. Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “presentism,” accessed February 5, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/presentism>.
54. G. J. Barker-Benfield, “Strong Men over Orderly Women,” chap. 6 in *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976): 45–57.
55. “Women in the Nineteen Century,” *Women in Literature*, updated January 11, 2017, http://www2.ivcc.edu/gen2002/Women_in_the_Nineteenth_Century.htm.