

***“Fear Not, I am With Thee: Christ’s Atonement and our Personal Growth”***

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ELDER BRUCE C. HAFEN: It is a privilege to be part of this wonderful gathering with you. As I think of the Relief Society General Presidency’s significant role in co-sponsoring this Women’s Conference, I’m reminded of what Elder LeGrand Richards said years ago at the dedication of the Relief Society building in Salt Lake City. Belle Spafford, then the Relief Society General President, said just before Elder Richards spoke, “Elder Richards, we sisters want you brethren to know that the Relief Society is 100% behind the Priesthood.” Elder Richards went to the pulpit and said, “Sister Spafford, I’m glad to know that the Relief Society is 100% behind the Priesthood--because the Priesthood is 100 YEARS behind the Relief Society!” That’s still true, but we’re working on it.

## **I. Introduction: Severe Mercy**

SISTER MARIE K. HAFEN: At our dinner table the other night, a friend shared a story from what she calls her “spiritual first-aid kit.” It’s a story she remembers when life feels cold and harsh--when the exhaustion is deep, the snow is getting deeper, and “Rocky Ridge” is still ahead. It comes from the high plains of Wyoming in October of 1856. Our friend calls this story “Severe Mercy.”<sup>1</sup>

Nine year-old Agnes Caldwell had been wading through the wind-driven snow with the rest of the Willie Handcart Company for what must have felt like an eternity when relief wagons appeared on the trail ahead of them. Before the storm hit, Agnes had been taking each mile of the autumn trail in stride, even the one that had been strewn with rattlesnakes. For *that* mile, she and her friend Mary held hands and jumped again and again over the snakes until they were out of danger, mercifully unharmed.

But after days of dragging her nearly frozen feet through the deepening snow, she wasn’t skipping any more. And she was literally starving. The death toll in her company was rising with every passing night. Yet, of the arrival of the relief party, all Agnes records in her

understated history is, “it certainly was a relief.” And then she describes her own rescue: “The infirm and the aged were allowed to ride, all able-bodied continued to walk. When the wagons started out, a number of us children decided to see how long we could keep up with the wagons, in hopes of being asked to ride. One by one they all fell out, until I was the last one remaining, so determined was I that I should get a ride. After what seemed the longest run I ever made before or since, the driver, [Brother] Kimball, called to me, “Say, sissy, would you like a ride?” I answered in my very best manner, “ Yes sir. ”

“At this he reached over, [took] my hand, [then clucked] to his horses [which made] me run with legs that seemed to me could run no farther. On we went [for what] seemed miles. [I thought he] was the meanest man that ever lived or that I had ever heard of, and other things that would not be a credit coming from one so young. Just at what seemed the breaking point, he stopped. Taking a blanket, he wrapped me up and lay me in the bottom of the wagon, warm and comfortable. Here I had time to change my mind, as I surely did, knowing full well [that] by doing this he saved me from freezing [to death].”<sup>2</sup>

Can you see why our friend calls this story “Severe Mercy”? “*I thought he was the meanest man that ever lived.*” Sitting here in our climate controlled comfort, put yourself in Agnes’s “shoes.” If I had been Agnes, I would have expected *a little* compassion from this “angel of mercy.” Couldn’t one look into my frost-bitten face or at my boney, rag-wrapped hand have entitled me to a crumb of kindness? But, no. This man took Agnes by that little hand and instead of swinging her up into his lap in an act of mercy, he signaled his team to go faster, forcing her into a run, which increased her circulation. His severe mercy saved her life.

This story has much to teach us about the redeeming and strengthening powers of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. You can see the symbolism. The wilderness strewn with rattlesnakes; the brutal and unexpected blizzard that turns that trail to Zion into a refiner’s fire; the young girl with her passion and determination to give the journey everything she’s got; the wagon master who was loving enough to lend his strength yet wise enough to stretch her to her limits--and courageous enough to volunteer for the rescue in the first place. This man didn’t *have* to leave the comforts of his home and this young girl didn’t *have* to hang on to his hand when he pressed her to give more. Yes, he saved her life, but *so did she!* To be successful, the rescue effort had to be reciprocal. They both had to give it their all.

To phrase these next questions in today’s vernacular, where is the enabling power of the Savior’s Atonement in this story? What is the role of grace here?

You may have noticed, as we have, that in the last few years more and more LDS people are using Atonement-related words and phrases in talking about their spiritual experiences. This growing dialogue may be coming out of the muddy trenches of each of our lives and our sometimes desperate need to be assured of God’s deliverance. Reaching deeper into the heart of the gospel is exactly what we should be doing when the storms are beating us down. But in our searching to explain our experiences, articulate our feelings, and teach our Sunday lessons, we may inadvertently draw one another away from the simple clarity of the Restored Gospel because, at least in part, we share so many of the same key words with other Christian churches. With the increased volume of our discourse, we are also sensing a little confusion.

One LDS woman, in trying to unravel the confusion for herself, made a list of stories from the Book of Mormon in which God's power delivered or strengthened someone, often miraculously. Going down the list she asked, when is this the Atonement's enabling power, and when is it priesthood power, or simply an answer to a prayer? She asked us, "Are there situations when we should be calling on one of these powers rather than another one?" The doctrine of the Atonement was feeling to her like a puzzle.

Our hope today is that we can help clarify some key elements of the doctrine of the Lord's Atonement, including how we *participate* in that doctrine. In doing this we hope you will feel reassured about Christ's desire to help us lift our burdens, and that you will feel more confident in your ability to stick with Him no matter what. We also hope that as we increase our understanding of what Christ has *done* for us, we might also increase our willingness to submit to whatever He may *ask* of us.

## II. The Purpose of Christ's Atonement--Our Growth and Development

BRUCE: Our doctrinal discussion of the Savior's Atonement begins with the story of Adam and Eve. A friend once asked me, if Jesus Christ is at the center of the gospel and the center of the temple, why doesn't the temple endowment teach the story of the life of Christ? What's all this about Adam and Eve? As I have thought about his question, I have come to believe that the story of Christ's life is the story of *giving* His Atonement. The story of Adam and Eve is the story of *receiving* His Atonement--and their story is our story.

Lehi told his children that if Adam and Eve had remained in the Garden of Eden, they would have known only innocence, and their spirits could not have grown and developed. "And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy for they knew no misery." Oh, I get it--no children, no misery! But there's more: "having no joy for they knew no misery, doing no good, for they knew no sin. Adam fell that men might be [mortal], and men are [mortal] that they might have joy."<sup>3</sup>

So the Fall was not a disaster, as traditional Christianity teaches. It was a grand victory that opened the door for all of us to the school we call mortality. When we walk through that door, we will learn from daily experience--some of it harsh experience--the difference between evil and good, misery and joy. Yet this earth is not our home. We are away at school. Knowing just that much gives us a unique understanding of who we are, who God is, and why we are here -- and why we need the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Let us look then at the overall *purpose* of the Atonement, which relates directly to our own purpose in coming to earth. That purpose-driven perspective explains why the Lord would at times take us by the hand and stretch us into a run.

We see the purpose of the Savior's grace and His Atonement in an entirely different light from the way other Christian churches see it. To understand that difference, let's take a brief look at what happened during the Great Apostasy. Since about the 5<sup>th</sup> century, traditional Christianity has taught--incorrectly--that because of the Fall, we are born with an evil nature. As one well-known Christian creed states, Adam and Eve "by their disobedience lost their purity and happiness, and in consequence of their fall all men have become sinners, totally depraved."<sup>4</sup>

This idea says that man's inborn evil nature is the primary cause of human sins; people sin mostly because they can't help it. In this incorrect view, only Christ's grace can overcome man's depraved nature, and overcoming that depravity is the main purpose of grace. And only God decides to whom He will extend grace; being evil, man couldn't choose it for himself. This view inaccurately sees grace as a one-way infusion, not as the two-way interaction it really is--as we will see shortly.

So we Latter-day Saints have a challenge when we use terms like "grace" and "enabling power," because those terms, long used by other churches, sometimes proceed from incorrect doctrinal assumptions. That means the vocabulary of traditional Christianity won't always work for us, and it may confuse us. On the other hand, the Restoration corrected those doctrines with clarity and light about who we are and why we're here. That clear light resonates in the heart of every child who sings "I am a Child of God," with echoes of divine parents, of having wandered from another sphere, of an inward yearning for home in the arms of a Father who has not only a body, but also a *heart*--a heart like ours.<sup>5</sup> We came to the earth not as depraved sinners but trailing clouds of glory, carrying the seeds of a potentially divine nature within us.

Modern-day scripture teaches us that we are born neither evil nor good by nature; rather, we are born "whole"<sup>6</sup> or "innocent."<sup>7</sup> Then, in a mortal environment that is subject to death and sinful influences, we will taste some sin and bitterness--not because we are innately bad, but because we can't learn to prize the sweet without actually tasting the bitter.<sup>8</sup> And because the effects of that bitterness may separate us from our Heavenly Father, we need Christ's Atonement to overcome whatever separates us from Him--such as the physical separation caused by death and the spiritual separation caused by our sins. That's what the word means: "at-one-ment," the act of re-uniting what has been separated.

In addition, we need the Atonement to help us grow to become like our Father, because we cannot be "with Him" forever in His celestial realm until we are "like Him." In this sense, our immature capacity separates us from Him--that's why he sent us away to school. So at birth we are completely innocent, literally babes in the woods. Then, as we grow up, like our first parents, we wrestle with afflictions--sin, misery, children-- and that wrestling, paradoxically, teaches us what joy means. In that way, our children also help us discover the "joy" part. The Savior's Atonement makes that process possible by protecting us while we learn from practice what love really is or why wickedness cannot produce happiness.<sup>9</sup> Because of the Atonement, we can learn from our experience without being condemned by it. So the Atonement is not just a doctrine about erasing black marks--it is the core doctrine that allows human development. Thus its purpose is to facilitate our growth, ultimately helping us to develop the Christ-like capacities we need to live with God.

MARIE: With that purpose in mind, the Lord's Atonement plays a key role in two categories of essential blessings--(A) unconditional and (B) conditional blessings. Unconditional blessings are given freely to everyone. The conditional ones require our *participation*. There are three kinds of conditional blessings: *forgiving*, *strengthening*, and *perfecting* blessings. We will discuss each of these in that order, even though these blessings may at times overlap and interact with each other in our lives.

### III. The Unconditional Blessings of Mercy and Grace

First are the unconditional blessings. The mercy and grace of our Father and His Son bless all mankind endlessly, no matter what we do. Their mercy is in some sense the source of all our blessings, starting with the Creation and our very presence on earth. For example, we heard one LDS woman express the absolute wonder she felt when she realized, “I live in a world where the Master of the Universe—the most powerful being in existence—just happens to know me and love me and to care about my eternal happiness. What did I ever do to deserve this? Aside from choosing to come to earth, not one thing.”

The gift of the universal resurrection is an unconditional miracle of the Atonement for everyone. Because He is risen, all will rise, and eventually all will kneel to acknowledge Him. The Savior’s Atonement also paid for Adam’s original sin. Other Christian churches believe, incorrectly, that each person still needs grace to be cleansed from Adam’s stain, which caused man’s sinful nature. But as the second Article of Faith states, men will not be punished for Adam’s transgression.

### IV. The Conditional Blessings of Christ’s Atonement—(A) Forgiving

BRUCE: The Atonement offers us three *conditional* blessings. We can be (a) forgiven, (b) strengthened, and (c) perfected--on the condition that we participate in those processes.

The eternal law of justice requires payment for our sins. Yet the eternal law of mercy allows Christ’s suffering to pay justice for our sins--if we repent. As we repent, then, the grace allowed by the law of mercy assures our forgiveness. As we sometimes stumble along, we have a perpetual need to repent and learn from our mistakes. This repenting and learning are matched by His perpetual willingness to forgive. Our repentance does not repay Christ—in that sense, we don’t “earn” His grace. However, as a condition of extending grace to us -- and to help us grow--He asks us to undertake a process of change or rehabilitation that begins with forsaking our sins. In this context, grace is a two-way street, interacting with our repentance. Thus will He help us change, if and as we humbly do all within our power—even when our sins are of the habitual or addictive kind, and we therefore need to draw on the continuous power of Christ’s Atonement.<sup>10</sup>

In terms that apply both to forgiveness and to the other conditional blessings of strengthening and perfecting, Nephi said, “It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.”<sup>11</sup> Some people think this means the Lord won’t help us until we have totally exhausted ourselves. But the larger doctrinal context makes clear that “after” in this verse means “along with”—His grace is with us before, during, and after, we do all we can.

### IV. Conditional Blessings—(B) Strengthening

When we take our repentance seriously, we can have the conversion experience that Alma called the “mighty change of heart,”<sup>12</sup> which may be either sudden or gradual. Thus begins the Atonement’s interactive strengthening process, as our obedience interacts with his grace. When this happened to King Benjamin’s people, they desired good rather than evil, and they made covenants to become “the children of Christ.” They took upon themselves His name, for He had “spiritually begotten” them—they were born again, then began to follow Him.<sup>13</sup>

Their experience demonstrates the covenant *relationship* Christ creates with his disciples through the covenants of baptism and the sacrament. As our lives show that we are sincerely *willing* to take upon us *His name*, always to *remember* Him, and to *keep his commandments*, He keeps his covenant to us—we will *always* have His spirit to be with us. Through this intimate, two-way relationship, the Savior offers us the ongoing assurance of forgiveness, strength, and the increasing light of becoming like Him. He continually nourishes our spirits, like a flowing spring. Then, as we comprehend more of His light, He offers us more because we are able to receive more. This *relationship* is then the foundation and the source of the strengthening and perfecting blessings that follow baptism.

MARIE: Thus begins the process of becoming a saint—sanctified--through the Atonement of Christ, as we yield “to the enticings of the Holy Spirit,” and put off “the natural man” and become “as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things” which the Lord sees “fit to inflict upon [us].”<sup>14</sup> If, however, we yield to the Adversary more than we do to the Spirit, we will become as Adam and Eve’s children, who “loved Satan more than God.”<sup>15</sup> Alma said that pursuing this carnal, sensual, and devilish path will ultimately “subject you to the spirit of the devil” who will “*seal you His.*”<sup>16</sup> Chilling! In contrast, if we remain on the covenant path, we have the priceless promise from King Benjamin that Christ will eventually “*seal you His.*”<sup>17</sup> We’d like to illustrate this strengthening process with two stories.

Allison was married in the temple and had several children. As they became teenagers some of them fell into deep trouble, which created turbulence in her marriage. For years their family had tried to do everything “right”—scriptures, prayer, Church, temple, family home evening. Yet, she said, “What I had imagined and hoped for was not happening and I [felt] completely stuck. My frustrated mind cried out to Him, ‘I was faithful and you left me anyway. Where [is] my support when all the fiery darts [are] being thrown at us?’”

Then, after four years of such dark times, a scripture opened to her as if it were a personal message from the Lord. “But remember, God is merciful; therefore, repent and thou art still chosen, and art again called to the work.”<sup>18</sup> In response, Allison said, “Hope began to again peek through my doubts. That small particle of hope in me stretched heavenward. Was God really merciful? Could I repent, [let] go of my doubting, and again be worthy of his support? I was willing to try.”

She worked as hard as she knew how to keep her spiritual commitments and to reach out to her family members in healing ways. The healing didn’t happen overnight, but over years it came in small and simple ways. “Our burden,” she said, “is being lifted—one scripture at a time, in a quiet prompting in the temple, as primary children sing their testimonies, and through the kind words of friends who sometimes have no idea [about] the past heartache.”

After seven years of exerting herself and continuing to interact with the Lord, Allison describes how her children began to return. “[My daughter] came into my room, sat on the bed, and for nearly two hours we talked, laughed, and cried. I had dreamed of moments like this. [From my son], I [now] receive my daily hug, which is expected and initiated by him. To see the Light of Christ again reflected in him brings such marvelous, peaceful joy that it far outweighs the sorrow of his past choices.” Allison said that she simply trusted Jesus. He carried her when she felt she could no longer move forward. She supplied her desire and her work, and He supplied His strength.

BRUCE: Another friend we'll call Tyler had long been an active Church member, but he had been so abused during his early years that he couldn't believe the Savior's strengthening promises would apply to anyone as broken as he felt. As he began learning that those promises were anchored in the deep roots of the Atonement, he sensed that the promises were real, but he still thought they were for other people. He was afraid to reach for those blessings because he thought they would be tainted by his touch. Gradually he found that Christ would strengthen him to fuel the process of developing his spirit. Then came the key insight that, with the Savior's help, the pain he had suffered in his life could fill him with empathy and compassion that would help him be of greater service to the Lord and His other children in need. He has since become an inspiring teacher and counselor, helping others find what he found— that the Savior could help him grow his weaknesses into strengths.

The experiences of Allison and Tyler echo a pattern in many scriptural stories about how the Lord strengthens His people *in* their afflictions. He does this because of His *covenant relationship* with them. When the children of Israel were in Egypt, “God heard their groaning, and [He] remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.” And God said, “ I have seen the affliction of *my* people. I know their sorrows.”<sup>19</sup> Then this to Moses after crossing the Red Sea: “Ye have seen what I did to the Egyptians [now that's an understatement!]*—and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you to myself.*” To myself. At one. “Therefore, if ye will obey my voice and keep my covenant, ye shall be unto me an holy nation.”<sup>20</sup>

The same pattern and language appear in the Lord's interaction with Alma's people when Amulon held them captive. “I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions.” Note that He says “my” people, not “the” people--because of His covenant relationship with them. “Lift up your heads and be of good comfort, for I know of the covenant which ye have made unto me.”<sup>21</sup> He keeps His covenant to strengthen us as we try diligently to keep our promises to Him.

However, He may not always deliver us out of bondage--at least not immediately—even if we are faithful. But He will strengthen us until our burdens feel lighter, often using the burdens to bless and teach us. Perhaps we can't exactly say that He “atoned for” our burdens beyond death and sin, and it may not be logically precise to say that “the Atonement” delivered the people of Moses or Alma – or Allison or Tyler. But His Atonement is what qualifies Christ to enter into a personal, covenant relationship with his faithful followers, then *Christ Himself* strengthens them through that Atonement-based relationship. In His words, “Fear not, for I have *redeemed* thee, and thou art *mine.*”<sup>22</sup> “I will strengthen thee, I will help thee.”<sup>23</sup>

The place of covenants in these stories shows that Christ extends his strengthening power on certain conditions . We needn't be perfect, but we must strive wholeheartedly, not half-heartedly. As Jacob put it, “[C]ome [to Him] with full purpose of heart, and *cleave* unto God as he *cleaveth* unto you.”<sup>24</sup> This doctrine of conditional grace differs from the traditional Protestant idea that grace is entirely a free gift. But this pattern of two-way, interactive covenants is the Lord's way of encouraging us to do what only we can do—exert ourselves enough to participate meaningfully in the growth process. *Without our exertion, even God can't make us grow, no matter how much grace he extends.* Think of the nearly frozen Agnes Caldwell. That severe mercy was unbelievably hard for her—but it pulled her into action that only she could exert, and it saved her life.

Latter-day scriptures and hymns use the term “grace” in a rich variety of strengthening ways—nearly all of them conditioned on our taking some clear, energetic action. Some samples: “Teach ye diligently, and my grace shall attend you.”<sup>25</sup> Alma’s “priests were not to depend upon the people for their support; but for their labor they were to receive the grace of God.”<sup>26</sup> To Moroni, “My grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; then will I make weak things become strong unto them.”<sup>27</sup> “Tho’ hard to you this journey may appear, Grace shall be as your day.” That promise from “Come, Come Ye Saints” is echoed in another favorite hymn, “As thy days may demand, so thy succor shall be.”<sup>28</sup> In the midst of our journeys, he will succor and strengthen us as fully as our hardest days may require.

MARIE: For some of us, “as thy days may demand” can mean unspeakable grief and pain from tragedies beyond our control. A man we know, for example, unaware that his child was behind his car, ran over and killed his own two-year old in the family driveway. This was the most devastating experience of this faithful man’s life. He blamed himself and felt unworthy before God and with his family. But his mistake was not his fault and it wasn’t a sin. It was an accident. How does the Atonement help this man? Or is the question better stated, how does Christ help him, or any of us, in the deepest anguish of our lives?

A woman we met asked her version of the same question. She had been severely abused as a little girl. She felt betrayed, abandoned, and alone—tormented, psychologically and spiritually. “For years,” she said “I have felt unclean and shut out from God’s presence. But I didn’t sin; I was sinned against. Will the Atonement help me?” We can answer her sincere question with a resounding yes! Because of His Atonement, Christ *will* help her—and you, and us. Help from that source is His ultimate expression of compassion toward each of us whatever our circumstances may be. (For a fuller discussion about healing from abuse inflicted on us by others, see “Forgiveness and Christ Figures.”<sup>29</sup>)

Alma tells us that Christ, apparently as part of His Atonement, took upon Himself the “pains” and “infirmities” of “His people.”<sup>30</sup> That means, at the very least, that we do not suffer alone. And if we let Him, He will also lift the burden of our cross *with* us—His hands beneath ours, His shoulders helping us bear the brunt of the load.

But beyond that, did Alma mean that the Savior somehow “paid” justice for our infirmities the same way He paid for our sins? Or, more broadly, did Alma mean that Christ *unconditionally* took upon Himself all human misery, thus relieving mankind of all unfairness, injustice, and all other forms of suffering?

We don’t believe so, because these interpretations would undermine both the Atonement’s reach and its purpose. For one thing, He took upon Himself the infirmities of “His people,” not “the people”—Alma is talking only about how Christ strengthens His covenant children. Yet even for them, He does not always eliminate the burden altogether, because doing so would not further the Atonement’s purpose of helping His children grow and mature to become “purified even as He is pure.”<sup>31</sup>

To snatch us completely out of life’s unfairness and injustices—out of our “effectual struggles,” to use King Limhi’s phrase<sup>32</sup>—would negate the very reason we came to earth, which is to



master the traits of Godliness even while under intense pressure. His grace allows us to be healed from and sanctified by that pressure without being crushed by it.

Christ earned the right to extend His grace by “suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind.” And He did so “that He may know according to the flesh how to succor his people . . .”<sup>33</sup> Succor means to help, aid, or relieve in time of need or distress. So His succoring can bless us with support, healing, and strength.

However, we could miss what this understanding of succoring and grace *offers* us if we don’t also grasp what it *asks* of us, and why. It’s not that God will simply remove the hard things if we decode the hidden messages or if we just push the right button, such as when the computer screen says, “click here to enable.” He asks us to give all we have to the refining process of grace--not to appease *Him*, but rather to engage *us*. There’s Agnes again.

Being engaged in the crucible of refinement can, in our hardest times, make us feel like we are walking through hell. And perhaps we literally are! But if we stick with Christ, He will show us the way *through*. He can do this because He walked through Hell himself without getting lost in it.

One of the survivors who had waded through the hellish handcart tragedy in Wyoming said, “We came to know Him in our extremities, and the price we paid to know Him was a privilege to pay.” When we also dig deeply enough to find him and know Him in such places, fears can become faith and trust, anger melts into meekness, anguish becomes empathy. Line upon line, grace for grace, He causes—if *we* will—the affliction to be consecrated for our gain.<sup>34</sup>

How does He consecrate our afflictions for our gain? It has something to do with what Elder Neal A. Maxwell called Christ’s “earned empathy,” derived from submitting Himself to all of life’s bitterness, descending “below all things,”<sup>35</sup> so He could know from His own flesh-and-bones experience how to succor His people.

Perhaps His divine empathy was also partly a gift from His Father in answer to His prayer for His disciples. “Father, I pray . . . for . . . those . . . that . . . believe in me, that I may be in them as thou art in me, that we may be one.”<sup>36</sup> It is as if He were saying, “Let me feel *with* them, Father, the way Thou dost feel *with* me. Let me feel their pain the way Thou, Father, dost feel mine.”

By being *in* us, He can feel with us so completely, so perfectly, as to be “at one” with us in our afflictions. And so He whispers to strengthen us in our darkest nights of the Refiner’s fire:

*Fear not, I am with thee; oh, be not dismayed.  
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid.  
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,  
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.  
. . . .  
When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply.*

*The flame will not hurt thee; I only design  
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.*<sup>37</sup>

#### IV. Conditional Blessings-- (C) Perfecting

BRUCE: Now we are ready to consider how the Lord's *perfecting* blessings can endow us with divine qualities through a process of becoming holy, like Christ. After He has helped to cleanse us from our earthly stains and has strengthened us through our tribulations to the greatest degree possible, we "can become invested, over a lifetime, with holiness from God."<sup>38</sup>

Of this perfecting process Moroni wrote, "*If* ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind, and strength, *then* is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ."<sup>39</sup> The "if-then" connection here says the Lord's perfecting grace is also conditional—*if* we forsake ungodliness and love Him, *then* He will endow us with holiness .

Here is an image that depicts this process. An early convert from Australia wrote that her past life was a "wilderness of weeds," but after she found the gospel, "flowers [began springing] up [everywhere]."<sup>40</sup> The Savior's Atonement helps us with both the weeds and with the flowers. Through the interactive miracles of repentance, forgiveness, and grace, Christ works with us to remove our sinful weeds and any other obstacles between ourselves and God. Then He can plant and help us nourish the seeds of divine qualities, like meekness, charity, and holiness. The Lord's grace does help these flowers grow. But even then, there may still be a few weeds in our flowers, and a few flowers in our weeds—it's an organic process.

MARIE: As an example of His helping us to become holy, we can look at the gift of charity, the saintly capacity to love others as Christ does. Moroni explained, "pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath *bestowed* upon *all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ*, that when he shall appear we shall be like him."<sup>41</sup> Is charity, then, a gift of grace? Yes, it is "bestowed"—it comes from outside us. But on what condition, since charity is also a conditional blessing? Those who receive charity are they who have become "true followers" of Jesus. The participation required of us at this higher level is more demanding.

BRUCE: So in looking at "all we can do" to enjoy the perfecting blessings, the Lord asks us more about the spirit of the law, less about the letter of the law; more about our core internal attitudes, less about a mechanical list of do's and don'ts; more about consecration and sacrifice, less about our activity percentages. Scriptures that describe the perfecting attributes say they are given to those who are "submissive, meek, humble, patient, [and] full of love;"<sup>42</sup> or who are "meek and lowly in heart;"<sup>43</sup> or whose lives reflect a "peaceable walk with the children of men;"<sup>44</sup> or those who yield "their hearts unto God."<sup>45</sup> Moroni asked that we "love God with all *your* might." We must love Him as fully as our limited personal capacity allows, but that doesn't mean we must reach some unreachable level of perfection by ourselves—for finally His grace is sufficient to perfect us in Him.

MARIE: As we give everything we have to the Lord and he gives us everything He has, together we replace our noxious weeds with abundant flowers. There is a passage in Moroni 8 that describes the complete process we've discussed today better than any scripture we know--from

forgiveness through spiritual strength to the perfections of charity and sanctification. “And the first fruits of repentance is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth remission of sins; And the remission of sins bringeth meekness and lowliness of heart; and because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which comforter filleth with hope and perfect love, which love [charity] endureth by diligence unto prayer, until the end shall come, when all the saints [the sanctified] shall dwell with God.”<sup>46</sup>

To illustrate how charity can come, we remember Elder Neal A. Maxwell. The quest of his life became his desire to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ. For years he thought about discipleship, he prayed about it, talked and wrote about it. In his later years, he began to see in the lives of others that adversity could be sanctifying. He saw three sources of suffering—our own mistakes, life’s natural adversities, and, at times, afflictions the Lord might “inflict” on us to teach us. Of the latter category Elder Maxwell wrote, “The very act of choosing to be a disciple can bring to us a certain special suffering—[a] dimension that comes with deep discipleship. [Thus] all who *will* can come to know [what Paul called] ‘the fellowship of his suffering.’”<sup>47</sup> Later he added, “If we are serious about our discipleship, Jesus will eventually request each of us to do those very things which are the most difficult for us to do.”<sup>48</sup>

After years of teaching others about these principles, Elder Maxwell was stricken in 1996 at age 70 with leukemia. As he worked to absorb the shock of that news, he said to those who knew the link he saw between discipleship and suffering, “I should have seen it coming.” This was what he came to call the “wintry doctrine”—the idea that we can’t internalize real consecration without our own “clinical experience.”

During the following eight years until his death in 2004, Elder Maxwell’s own empathy toward other people increased. He discovered for himself what he had tried to teach others: The Savior is able to succor us in our afflictions because he has drunk the cup of affliction himself. “Earned empathy,” he called it. And those who knew him during his own season of the wintry doctrine saw a sanctifying process at work in his life, in his teaching, in his interaction with others, and in his visits to the homes of fellow sufferers. At one point, he sensed the Lord answering his question about why. “I have given you leukemia so that you might teach the people with more authenticity.” No wonder Neal Maxwell would feel drawn to a phrase like “severe mercy.”

BRUCE: We believe he was receiving the gift of charity, as he discovered the connection between charity and affliction. Those who seek to be Christ’s true followers may need to emulate His sacrificial experience, not only through physical pain but in other ways, at least enough to taste His empathy and His charity. For only then are we like Him enough to feel His love for others *the way He feels it*—to love, “*as I have loved you.*”<sup>49</sup> It may well be that charity and suffering are but two sides of the same coin. Little wonder, then, that Christ will not take away all of our suffering. After all, He said, “those who will not endure chastening *cannot* be sanctified.”<sup>50</sup> May we not be surprised, and may we not shrink, when we discover, paradoxically, how dear a price we may need to pay to receive charity--which is, finally, a gift of grace.

I’d like now to offer a final thought before Marie concludes for both of us. I have the personal sense that those who receive the full gift of charity will feel Christ’s love not only for others, they will also feel His love for *them* in a way that assures them beyond any question that -- despite their

remaining weaknesses – their sacrifices and their lives are finally and fully acceptable to Him. I foresee that day as the culminating moment of Christ’s Atonement for us, when we shall be “like him, for we shall see him as he is,” and we will be “purified even as He is pure.”<sup>51</sup> Perhaps that was Lehi’s experience, when he felt himself “encircled about eternally in the arms of [his Redeemer’s] love.”<sup>52</sup> The Lord has promised that those whose “hearts are honest and are broken, and their spirits contrite, and are willing to observe their covenants by sacrifice are *accepted* of me.”<sup>53</sup> Acceptance—with Him, like Him.

We knew a very faithful older woman in Brisbane, Australia who was present on a night in 1997, when President Gordon B. Hinckley talked to several thousand Australian saints in a large stadium. As he concluded, he testified of the Lord’s love for them, and he expressed his confidence in them in a way that somehow invited an especially calm spirit to descend. The next day, this sister said to us, “I have never believed that my life could really be acceptable to the Lord. But as President Hinckley spoke to our hearts, I felt for the first time that, despite all of my frailties, the Lord could *accept* me. I was astounded.”

Our friend Donna grew up desiring to marry and raise a large family. But that blessing never came. Instead, she spent her adult years serving the people in her ward with unmeasured compassion and counseling disturbed children in a large school district. She had crippling arthritis and many long, blue days. Yet she always lifted and was lifted by her friends and family. Once when teaching about Lehi’s dream, she said with gentle humor, “I’d put myself in that picture on the strait and narrow path, still holding on to the iron rod, but collapsed from fatigue right on the path.” In an inspired blessing given just before her death, Donna’s home teacher said the Lord had “accepted” her. Donna cried. No word could have meant more to her.

These two women discovered that the Lord not only forgives us and eases our burdens, ultimately He will also accept and perfect the honest in heart who observe every sacrifice with a contrite spirit—even when their lives fall short of flawless perfection. The Atonement of Jesus Christ makes this acceptance both real and possible—and He stretches forth His accepting hands unto us “all the day long.”<sup>54</sup> I testify that each of us can one day experience that ultimate acceptance, if we really want it—so long as we don’t want anything else more.

MARIE: The heart of Agnes Caldwell’s rescue lies in the moment her hand met the hand of the wagon master in that life-saving clasp. So it is between each of us and Christ. The full blessings of His Atonement cannot be unveiled in us until our hand reaches for, and hangs onto, His. In all of His power, He can’t force us to take His hand, but He does invite and beckon us to come to Him.

And He is waiting to meet us in His Holy House. The temple’s saving, healing, and perfecting powers come from the Atonement of Christ, but we can receive them only if we get ourselves there – like Agnes running for the wagon.

For the last three years we have spent cherished time in the St. George Temple looking into the faces of those who have taken hold and are hanging on to the Lord’s hand. His presence in their lives is evident in their faces. A mom, with an infuriating teenage daughter at home, told me how sacrificing to be in the temple more often, and living what she learned and felt there, was helping. “Not a lot of changes yet with my daughter,” she said. “But I am becoming a different person, a better person.”

In light of Section 84 we can see that this young mother –and any sacrificing disciple like her–is absorbing the power of the higher priesthood and higher ordinances. Without these, the mysteries of Godliness—or the power to become like Him--*cannot* be manifest in the flesh. If you want this power in your mortal body – inscribed in the fleshy tablets of your heart – put yourself in the temple. Wherever we may be, could we take the shoes off our hearts when we think and speak of Him and His Atonement, just as we do when we enter the temple?

As I was walking up to the temple one day, I came upon a grandmotherly woman-- one of our temple workers--bending over, tending to the flowers near the front door. She looked up. Her aging face was alive with light—the face of a lifetime of temple worship and temple living. Her countenance enveloped me in the aura of the temple and filled me with the desire to have that same happy holiness in me. We will find Him in the temple. He is the template of the temple. He is making a temple of us.

“He marked the path and led the way, And every point defines To light and life and endless day, Where God’s full presence shines.” In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

(Closing Song: Verses 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 of “How Firm a Foundation”—selected to build on the talk’s themes.)

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase apparently originated with C. S. Lewis. See Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (Harper & Row 1977), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Arrington Madsen, *I Walked to Zion: True Stories of Young Pioneers on the Mormon Trail* (Deseret Book 1994), pp. 57-59.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Nephi 2:23-25

<sup>4</sup> Salvation Army Creed, article 5

<sup>5</sup> We first heard this phrase from Terry Givens.

<sup>6</sup> Moses 6:54

<sup>7</sup> D&C 29:39

<sup>8</sup> D&C 29:39. See also Moses 6:54-55.

<sup>9</sup> See Alma 41:10

<sup>10</sup> See Craig Cardon, “The Savior Wants to Forgive,” May, 2013 Ensign; Brad Wilcox, *The Continuous Atonement*, (Deseret Book) 2011.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Nephi 25:23

<sup>12</sup> Alma 5:12-26; Mosiah 5

<sup>13</sup> See Mosiah 5

<sup>14</sup> Mosiah 3:19

<sup>15</sup> Moses 5:13

<sup>16</sup> Alma 34:35

<sup>17</sup> Mosiah 5:15

<sup>18</sup> D&C 3:10

<sup>19</sup> Ex. 2:4-7

<sup>20</sup> Ex. 19:4-6

<sup>21</sup> Mosiah 24:13

<sup>22</sup> Isaiah 43:1

<sup>23</sup> Isaiah 41

<sup>24</sup> Jacob 6:5

<sup>25</sup> D&C 88:78

<sup>26</sup> Mosiah 18:26

<sup>27</sup> Ether 12:27

<sup>28</sup> “How Firm a Foundation,” Hymns #85.

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<sup>29</sup> Bruce C. Hafen, *The Broken Heart: Applying the Atonement to Life's Experiences* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, Expanded Edition 2008), pp. 239-49

<sup>30</sup> Alma 7:11-12.

<sup>31</sup> Moroni 7:48.

<sup>32</sup> Mosiah 7:18

<sup>33</sup> Alma 7:11-12

<sup>34</sup> See 2 Nephi 2:2.

<sup>35</sup> D&C 88:6

<sup>36</sup> 3 Nephi 19:23. "I am in the Father and the Father in me; and inasmuch as ye have received me, ye are in me and I in you." D&C 50:40-44

<sup>37</sup> "How Firm a Foundation," Hymn #85.

<sup>38</sup> Elouise M. Bell, "Holiness," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, pp. 648-49.

<sup>39</sup> Moroni 10:32

<sup>40</sup> Martha Maria Humphreys, quoted in Marjorie Newton, *Southern Cross Saints: The Mormons in Australia (1991)*, p. 227.

<sup>41</sup> Moroni 7:48

<sup>42</sup> Mosiah 3:19

<sup>43</sup> Alma 37:34

<sup>44</sup> Moroni 7:4

<sup>45</sup> Hel. 3:35

<sup>46</sup> Moroni 8:25-26

<sup>48</sup> Quote on book cover jacket for Bruce C. Hafen, "*A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell*," (Deseret Book), 2002

<sup>49</sup> John 13:34

<sup>50</sup> D&C 101:5

<sup>51</sup> Moroni 7:48

<sup>52</sup> 2 Nephi 1:15

<sup>53</sup> D&C 97:8-9

<sup>54</sup> Jacob 6:4