

“It Was as If a Blanket of Love Was Flowing over Me”

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When I was growing up my parents provided many learning experiences for me and my four siblings. One of my favorite things that we did was to go on one-day adventures. It seemed like whenever the weather was good and my father had a day off from work, my mother would make a delicious picnic lunch, and we would all pile in our car and go. We lived in Price, Utah, and there were lots of places to explore close to our home. We traversed many dirt roads, as if our Chrysler was an all-terrain vehicle, and we found many treasures along the way.

I have a lot of fond memories of these adventures. They were very happy times. What I didn’t realize until I was older and had children of my own was that these little excursions must have been somewhat of a sacrifice for my parents. Instead of staying home and relaxing on my father’s day off, they made sure that we were doing something as a family. I know that these little trips in the car were not quiet, and after romping around in the outdoors, climbing and exploring, the fragrance in the car on our return home must have left something to be desired.

Looking back on these great experiences, I am amazed at how patient my parents were with us. I realize now that they made these sacrifices because they loved us and wanted us to develop a greater love for them and for each other. I believe they understood that this bond of love would make it easier for us to listen to them and follow their advice because we felt close to them.¹ As I came to understand the gospel plan, I realized that my parents’ loving actions and desires were a reflection of our Heavenly Father’s love for each of His children.

The Church’s Handbook of Instructions states that “The family is ordained of God. It is the most important unit in time and in eternity.”² It further states that “He established families to bring us happiness, to help us learn correct principles in a loving atmosphere, and to prepare us for eternal life.”³

Today I would like to speak about family relationships, specifically the relationships that we have with our children, and how the Savior's love, mercy and compassion can help us improve, and sometimes endure, those relationships. Our children can be the source of our greatest happiness, but they can also be the source of our greatest sorrow. It's during these times that we—both parents and children—need to feel the love, mercy and compassion of the Savior.

When children come into our families, we as parents hope that we will be able to love and care for them and provide all that they need, both physically and spiritually, to be happy throughout their lives. This is a responsibility we cannot take lightly. In "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," we read, "Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, and to teach them to love and serve one another, observe the commandments of God and be law-abiding citizens wherever they live. Husbands and wives—mothers and fathers—will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations."

So as parents we try to do our best and hope for an outcome that will be happy and joyful. But from personal experience, I know that as hard as we may try to teach and provide for our children in the right way, the outcome can be that of sorrow and pain. Sometimes it can even be baffling to try to figure out why some of our children thrive and others struggle even though they have been reared in the same home. We love our children. We are grateful when they are happy. But when one of them behaves in a way that causes heartache—heartache that words cannot adequately express—we sometimes find ourselves being left with feelings of despair. It's during these trying times that we as parents earnestly seek for help, guidance and comfort, not only for our wayward children, but for ourselves.

It was during one of these difficult times with one of our children that I remember reading the parable of the prodigal son. Through this parable, Christ teaches us how we as parents should respond to our wayward children. Two things stood out to me as I read the parable. First, I was touched by the way in which the father responds when he sees his wayward son returning home. In Luke 15:20 it gives us this description: "But when he [the son] was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." It is a perfect example of forgiveness, mercy and love.

The second thing that stood out to me was that the parable does not mention the prodigal son's mother. That caused me to ponder how she would have been portrayed, and what her feelings might have been throughout the entire episode. I imagine that it would have been a difficult time for her. I imagine she would have been very sorrowful beyond description when her youngest son, whom she loved and cared for from his birth, asked his father for his "portion of goods" (Luke 15:12).

President David O. McKay noted that "the 'younger son' ... was immature in his judgment. He was irking under the restraint, and he rather resented the father's [and I'll add mother's] careful, guiding eye. He evidently longed for so-called freedom, wanted, so to speak, to try his wings. ... Here is a case of ... deliberate choice. Here is, in a way,

rebellion against authority.”⁴ In other words, their son wanted to leave them and to reject everything about them. And he did. He gathered his “portion of goods” ... “and took his journey into a far country” (Luke 15:12, 13).

How long was he gone? Long enough to “[waste] his substance with riotous living” and long enough to live during “a mighty famine in [the] land” in which “he began to be in want” because of his lack of money (Luke 15:13, 14). Long enough, according to Robert L. Millet, to become an “indentured servant—a status above that of a slave, but one that bound him by contract to work as a general laborer [specifically a pig farmer] for his employer for a specified time.”⁵

What did his parents do during the time he was gone? The parable does not mention what they did; we are left only to our own imaginations and our own experiences to answer that question. I believe that they continued on with their lives, performing their daily tasks and service, but with great sadness at the loss of their son. I know in our own family, the father would have spent a lot of time comforting the mother, for as the saying goes, most mothers are only as happy as their most miserable child. The mother would have spent every day and night wondering and worrying about her lost child. She would be asking herself time and time again what more she could have done for him that would have made him want to stay with his family. She may have even had regrets about not being the mother she should have been. She would have constantly been worried about his well-being and about whether he was happy. She may have even had feelings of anger towards him because of the apparent disregard for his family.

But the thought that may have worried her most of all—and which she would have tried to push from her mind—was the question of whether he was still alive. I picture her having the same concerns as Lehi’s wife, Sariah. Sariah truly mourned because of her sons when she thought they were lost. “For she had supposed that [they] had perished in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 5:1-2). And, maybe, like Sariah, the mother of the prodigal son would have complained to her husband, blaming him and wondering how he could have even given in to their son’s demands of having his portion given to him so he could leave.

It is experiences like these that may make it difficult for us to have faith enough to believe the Savior’s admonition and the theme of this Women’s Conference, “Therefore, continue your journey and let your hearts rejoice; for behold, and lo, I am with you even unto the end” (D&C 100:12).

What can we do to increase our faith and happiness during these times when our relationships with our children may make it seem impossible for our hearts to rejoice? How can we feel comfort?

After having their first child, my friend Kelly and her husband were for some reason at that time unable to have more children. Because of this, they decided that they would adopt a baby. They did all that was required by adoption agencies, but again, for some reason they were overlooked.

When their only child was nine years old, Kelly received a phone call from a friend who informed Kelly that she had been asked to find a home for a five-year-old boy. The boy and his five other siblings had been reared by their grandparents because their mother was unfit to care for them. The grandparents could no longer care for them. They had done the best they could, but their health was failing them and they couldn't continue on.

Out of desperation, the grandparents had come from Texas to Utah in hopes of finding families that would take their grandchildren. Homes were found for the five other children, and only the five-year-old boy remained. Kelly's friend knew that Kelly and her husband had been trying to adopt, so she called Kelly in hopes that they would be able to take this boy into their home. Kelly, of course, asked for some time to think about this. Kelly's friend told her that they only had until the next morning to decide. Kelly hung up the phone, and the next thing she knew, her friend had brought the little boy to her home so that Kelly could visit with him. Kelly told me that she and her husband didn't have time to fast and pray about this decision, they only had time to "pray fast." The little boy never left their home.

That was 12 years ago. It has not been an easy road for any of them since then. Having been abandoned twice already, first by his mother and then by his grandparents, it has been difficult for this boy to believe that his adoptive parents could really love him. He felt that Kelly and her husband were forced into taking him into their home, making it difficult for him to get close to his new family for fear that they would also leave him. Currently he is in a facility for troubled youth.

But Kelly and the rest of the family have not given up and have not stopped loving him. They drive two hours each Sunday to visit with him. They do this because they really do love him and have his best interest in their hearts. Kelly believes that because they have supported him through all the trials they have experienced together, he is finally feeling their unconditional love for him.

Although this family has experienced difficult times, Kelly feels as if a blanket of love has been flowing over [them] throughout the years. From the moment they were contacted about the little boy, Kelly had an unwavering knowledge that this was Heavenly Father's plan for them. She knew that no matter what happened, even through what have seemed to be overwhelming challenges, this young boy was meant to be a part of their family and that they would receive opportunities for growth and great blessings as a family because of him. She believed President Thomas S. Monson's admonition that we "reach out to rescue those who need our help and lift them.... It is the Lord's work, and when we are on the Lord's errand...we are entitled to the Lord's help."⁶ Through living the gospel, through prayer, scripture study, and remembering and keeping commandments and temple covenants, they have been able to feel the Savior's love, compassion and mercy for them.

They have also been able to recognize the benefits that have come from this experience, the "correct principles" they have learned "in a loving atmosphere" to "prepare [them] for eternal life," as the Church Handbook indicates.⁷ Kelly has expressed that even though

she does not know what the future will bring or what challenges lie ahead for their family, she would never trade this experience.

Sometimes when we are stretched in such significant ways by our children, we find that we have more capacity to do things than we realized. Elder Bruce C. Hafen related the following story from his family: “One of our children once was in great difficulty in his fourth-grade class. If he didn’t complete a certain hand-made project by the next day, he would face certain disaster. After dinner, my wife, Marie, told me she had thought of a way to help him. I ushered our other children into another room for other activities, and the handicraft project began in the kitchen. Periodically, I heard outbursts from our fourth-grader, who kept tormenting his mother and insisting he wouldn’t do another thing. I was ready to send him to his room and forget it, but my wife calmly proceeded with her plan.

“After about three hours, as I was tucking the other children into bed, the little builder and his mother entered the bedroom. Carrying his project as proudly as if it were a birthday cake, he invited his two brothers to come and see it. It was obvious from looking at it that he had made every stitch of it himself. He placed it on a counter and started for his bed. Then he looked back at his mother with a broad, boyish grin. He ran across the room, threw his arms around her waist, and hugged her tightly. As he grinned at her again, the two of them exchanged glances that carried great meaning. He went to his bed, and we left the room.

“‘What happened?’ I asked Marie. ‘How did you do it?’ She replied that she had simply made up her mind that no matter what he said or did, she wouldn’t raise her voice or lose her patience. She had just decided that leaving him was not an alternative, even if the project took all night. Then she made this significant observation: *‘I didn’t know I had it in me.’*”⁸

Such trials of patience often benefit us as parents just as much, if not more, than they do our children. Like Sister Hafen, if we simply focus in on our love for our children, we will discover that we are capable of more than we realized before. And because of our children, especially our wayward children, we will have a glimpse of what it is like to have Christ-like love and patience.

When we are experiencing such challenges, it may be beneficial to ask ourselves what we need to learn from them. If we ask ourselves this question, we are able to have a better perspective on the difficult situations that we face. This earth life, and the relationships that come with it, present us with our opportunities for growth. Elder Neal A. Maxwell said that, “Your lives, your friendships, your marriages, your families, your neighbors and coworkers currently constitute the sample of humanity which God has given you. We are each other’s clinical material, and we make a mistake when we disregard that sober fact. No wonder, therefore, we feel stress at times.”⁹ Elder Maxwell goes on to say, “the Lord allows us to practice on each other, even in our imperfections. And each of us knows what it is like to be worked on by a ‘student’ rather than a senior surgeon. Each of

us, however unintentionally, has also inflicted some pain.”¹⁰ It’s sobering when we realize that we may be the cause of someone else’s misery.

I refer once again to the parable of the prodigal son. When the lost son returned home, his father upon seeing him ran towards him because he was overjoyed to see his youngest son. The relationship between this father and his wayward son is the main focus of the parable, but that is not it’s only focus. Note that Christ starts the story by saying “a certain man [and presumably his wife] had two sons” (Luke 15:11). And there are lessons for parents in the relationship between them and the other son, as well. We learn that the oldest son was angry with his father because of the warm reception that his younger brother received. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland stated that, “Surely, for this father [and I’ll add mother], the pain over a wayward child who had run from home and wallowed with swine is now compounded with the realization that this older, wiser brother, the younger boy’s childhood hero as older brothers always are, is angry that his brother has come home.”¹¹ Elder Holland then clarifies: “[t]his son is not so much angry that the other has come home as he is angry that his parents are so happy about it.”¹² The oldest son had remained faithful to his parents and had worked hard for them, but it was his youngest brother who was receiving all of the attention from his parents.

Sometimes, out of necessity, we focus so much of our attention on the child that is the cause of our sleepless nights, that we unintentionally overlook the needs of our other children. We need to be aware of the needs of all of our children and the impact of these experiences on them, as well.

In the parable, the father treated his sons exactly as the Savior would have. He tells his oldest son, “Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:31-32). Brother Millet states that the father was indicating his “deep tenderness, affection, and appreciation for the nobility of the older son’s deeds. ... it is not only nice and sweet and kind [that they should make merry at the return of the youngest son]; the father is here saying that it is a divine necessity, the right thing to do on this occasion. It was what he must do. It is what God would have done.”¹³

I believe that the mother would have felt the same way and would have wholeheartedly supported the actions of her husband in his righteousness. I believe that she would have been portrayed as a woman of great faith and wisdom. Through her trials she would have come to depend on the Savior for comfort and support and would have found strength as she relied on Him. And she would have taught this important principle to her children. She would have known that this earth life is the opportunity for growth and, as Elder Maxwell pointed out, that we are indeed “each other’s clinical material.” She would have had the wisdom to realize that some days would be more challenging than others with her children, and that at those times she would have to pray more fervently for the help and patience that she needed. She would have learned to pay attention to the tender mercies that she received each day—things that brought her happiness. And she would have taught her children to do the same. She would have taken very seriously her charge to “rear [her] children in love and righteousness ... to teach them to love and serve one

another, [to] observe the commandments of God.”¹⁴ With tenderness and compassion, she would have expressed her appreciation to her children for the good things that they had done.

Perhaps the prodigal’s mother would continue to be overanxious about the welfare of her children even after his return. Would her youngest son leave them again? Would her oldest son be able to reconcile with his parents and his brother? As Brother Millet observed, “Unlike a fairy tale, the parable of the prodigal son does not end on the note of ‘and they lived happily ever after.’

“How does it end?” Brother Millet continued. “Did the older brother close his ears to the loving counsel of his father [and mother], steel himself against compassion, and live and die an angry and bitter man? Or was he, we hope and pray, deeply touched by the love of his father [and mother]—pure love for him, as well as his returning brother? Did he allow the power of the Almighty to transform his soul, reshape his attitudes and actions, and make him into an instrument of divine love?

“In fact,” Brother Millet concludes, “this is an open-ended story, and each of us must interpret its meaning in the light of our own experience.”¹⁵

I find comfort in knowing that in our own experiences with our children, we have a loving Savior and Heavenly Father who wants us—and all our children—to succeed and be happy. With that divine help, we must never give up, knowing that the power of God’s love is greater than we are capable of understanding. Orson F. Whitney quoted Joseph Smith when he taught: “Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return. They will have to pay their debt to justice; they will suffer for their sins; and may tread a thorny path; but if it leads them at last, like the penitent Prodigal, to a loving and forgiving father’s heart and home, the painful experience will not have been in vain. Pray for your careless and disobedient children; hold on to them with your faith. Hope on, trust on, till you see the salvation of God.”¹⁶

We and our children are each other’s “clinical material.” If we strive in faith to reach out and help our children understand the love, mercy, and compassion that the Savior has for them, we—and they—will be able to have “the peace of God rest upon [us]” (Alma 7:27) like a blanket of love. I so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ Family Guidebook (2006), 4-11.

² Handbook 2: Administering the Church, Section 1.1.1

³ Handbook 2: Administering the Church, Section 1.1.4

⁴ Robert L. Millet, “Lost and Found: Pondering the Parable of the Prodigal Son,” *Studies in The Bible and Antiquity*, vol. 4 (2012), 97.

⁵ Millet, “Lost and Found,” 98-99.

⁶ *Ensign*, May 2005, 55, 56.

⁷ Handbook 2: Administering the Church, Section 1.1.4.

⁸ Bruce C. Hafen, "Individualism and Autonomy in Family Law: The Waning of Belonging," 1991 *BYU L. Rev.* 1, 40.

⁹ Neal A. Maxwell, "Jesus the Perfect Mentor," *Ensign*, Feb. 2001.

¹⁰ Neal A. Maxwell, "A Brother Offended," *Ensign*, May 1982.

¹¹ Millet, "Lost and Found," 107 (quoting Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Other Prodigal," *Ensign*, May 2002).

¹² Millet, "Lost and Found," 108 (quoting Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Other Prodigal," *Ensign*, May 2002, 63).

¹³ Millet, "Lost and Found," 111.

¹⁴ "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," para. 6.

¹⁵ Millet, "Lost and Found," 115.

¹⁶ James E. Faust, "Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered," *Ensign*, May 2003, 61 (quoting Orson F. Whitney, *Conference Report*, April 1929, 110).