

God's Love Lifts Us Up

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"Oh, it is wonderful to know that our Heavenly Father loves us—even with all our flaws! His love is such that even should we give up on ourselves, He never will. We see ourselves in terms of yesterday and today. Our Heavenly Father sees us in terms of forever. Although we might settle for less, Heavenly Father won't, for He sees us as the glorious beings we are capable of becoming." [Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin, *The Great Commandment*, G.C. 2007]

These are Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin's words, spoken at General Conference in 2007. I love his words because they focus on "Who We Really Are". It lifts us w/ hope in the principles that govern an Eternal Plan... a plan in which we very much have a part! It reminds us that – primarily and overwhelmingly-- we are LOVED.

God's love is sufficient to bless us in all of our struggles. His love may **comfort** us in our sorrows, **strengthen** us in our fears and weakness, and **buoy** us in our resolve to use our agency with renewed hope and focus.

My heart is tender, brothers and sisters, as I take this honored opportunity to speak to you. I am prayerful that our Father in Heaven will bless me and you w/ the Holy Ghost. In so blessing us, you will hear the heavenly whisperings you need to hear in our time together. My hope is that:

- That you who struggle with SSA never, never, never give up.
- That those of you who are their loved ones may find new & better ways of coping & understanding; & that you find guidance for yourself and your loved one.
- That those of you who are ecclesiastical leaders find an ever greater depth of compassion for those in your flock, and that you are blessed with specific heavenly direction in strengthening and assisting your members who deal with these issues that burden them.

Quite some years ago, I got to know a young man who was attending a Best of EFY program at which I was speaking. We struck up an email correspondence. After a while, he opened up to me about his SSA concerns, and the anguish he was going through. I knew his heart to be beautiful, and his testimony of truth to be strong. Through the years, as he prepared for his full time mission, served faithfully, returned home to attend school, and get on with his life, I was blessed to remain close to him and grow to greater love him as we got to know each other better.

His struggle with SSA did not diminish his testimony. It did, however, cause him agony as he wrestled with how to fit in, how to get past the issues, hurt, & struggles; and how to feel the love of our God.

He chose the path that would bring him hope, healing, and goodness. He chose to be swallowed up in the Atonement of Christ, to accept the gift the Savior offers, and to “know Christ in his extremities”, as it were... He exercised his righteous desire to deal with this issue by turning fully to Christ. In doing so, he began to heal. With that healing has come understanding, compassion, and great blessings.

Today, he and his family- his wife and children- work together to grow in love and truth. Though they deal with frustrations and troubles like we all do, they move forward in righteousness and in love. What a tribute to faith, self-work, and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ! His love has grown exponentially as he has gained comfort, strength, and the buoying of his spirit through God’s love.

I love and admire him. I have seen what love, testimony, and utilizing the Atonement have done for him.

Tonight, I can offer my testimony, and my heart full of love. I can bear witness of Truth and I have chosen a few of these truths to share with you:

1. GOD LOVES US.

...Enough that He gave his only begotten Son. It is a circumstance I cannot imagine. But I am deeply grateful for it, & for such profound love that would offer that kind of giving and sacrifice.

There is *nothing* we can do to stop our God- our Father- from loving us. There **are** things we may do to stop him from *blessing* us- yesbut nothing will ever stop him from loving us.

The adversary would have us think otherwise, of course. His work is to estrange us from our Father and our Savior. He is effective in his strategy to make us feel we aren’t good enough or worthy enough. Our feelings of hopelessness, despair, anger or depression can effectively pull us away from our God. Satan can stir us up in FEAR.

Let me share with you an acronym about fear that I hope will help: FEAR- False Evidence Appearing Real. The father of lies will take a truth & twist it, conceal, pervert so that we swallow a Lie. False Evidence Appearing Real is one of Satan’s specialties, it seems.

He specializes in Lies: including those that would make us feel less than we are.

He manipulates and distorts.

He is a coward and he would have us hide – as he does- behind a wall of lies.

His unruly efforts can cloud our vision, and confuse our minds. His False Evidence can then **seem** real--- may APPEAR real --- to our earthly senses.

But if we tune in with our *spiritual* senses, we can discern his lies and know that **God Loves Us**. He delights to bless and comfort us. He knows us better than we know ourselves. When we lose our way, his love is like a clear voice directing us to safety :

I'd like to share with you the story of a little girl who went with her mom to a department store. She sat on the floor, at her mom's feet, as her mother shopped. At some point, her mother moved on. Neither of them realized they had become separated. When the child realized her mom was no longer there, she jumped up in panic, running from aisle to aisle. Tears began to flow and she called out to her mother. A clerk saw her and came to her rescue. She picked her up and carried her through several aisles, in a futile attempt to find her mother. Finally, the clerk had an inspired idea. "Let's go to the front of the store." She said to the child. Placing the little girl up on the counter, she asked if she knew how to use a microphone. The girl nodded her head. "Then," the clerk spoke kindly, "lean into the mic and speak into it. Your mother will hear your voice and come get you. With tears running down her face, the little one leaned close into the mic and, with a little sob in her voice, said: "I would like to bear my testimony. I know this Church is true."

Shortly thereafter, they mother and daughter were reunited! Most assuredly, mom recognized that voice over the microphone!"

Oh, that it were so easy, when life's difficulties toss us & we are lost, to be 'found' again. Yet, w/ a childlike trust, it is possible for us to humbly & simply do what is required – from our hearts -in order to regain our safe haven, just as this little girl followed her heart.

Our voice is heard when we, in our tears and trials, call out for help. Our prayers ascend, and our answers will come. When our burdens are too great to carry, Christ's job – and His delight- is to lift those burdens and ease our pain. Under the Father's direction, the Savior assists & lifts us when we feel like there's no more strength to move ourselves. God loves us greatly. This is a truth.

2. God's Laws are eternal and unchanging. The gospel of Jesus Christ is Truth. The definition of truth given in 1833, in D&C 93, speaks of things "As they are...as they were...and as they are to come". Jacob 4:13 tells us the Spirit speaketh the truth & lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, & of things as they really will be...plainly, for the salvation of our souls."

We at this conference accept truth. Not the false evidence or the shifting definitions offered by some. Not the changing laws of governments. Not popular political or societal views.

They may in No way correlate w/ God's eternal laws.

**God's ways do not change. Including the truth that male and female were created, that we might fulfill the measure of our creation & grow in covenantal relationship. "Marriage

between a man and a woman is ordained of God and ... the family is central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children" (Pres Boyd K. Packer, Ensign, Nov. 1995, 102.) This teaching, this truth, remains solidly in place.

Those of us who hold to the Rod may have to hold on tighter than generations before us. But hold we must. It seems that, as followers of Christ, we must sometimes go through hard things. Holding to the eternal laws will get us through them.

Some years ago, while on assignment in Omaha, Nebraska, I had an understanding given me while visiting Winter Quarters, about "Hard Things"-

It is a sobering experience to walk the Winter Quarters area. When I saw the plaque on the piece of ground on which the names of those who died are written, it moved me. There is a bronze statue of a man with his arm around his wife. They peer into a shallow grave, another of their children who has passed away and must be buried. Along the edge of that statue are some of the words to a hymn we know: "Why should we mourn or think our lot is hard...all is well." }...

Little cabins that they called home had roofs unable to keep out all the snow and cold rain that fell that winter time. I learned that on occasion, in the very haven of their homes, they must walk through cold, wet mud up to their ankles. My heart broke for them.

On the plane home, pondering over the sobering and sacred experience there, I felt an impression that moved me to the core. I heard the words something like these: "You & your generation live in a time of cold, wet mud – up to your ears. It is just a different kind."

Indeed. Our society is one in which good is seen as evil and evil is seen as good. Satan knows truth from lies. His rebellion in the pre-existent state disallowed him from receiving a body of his own. He distorts truth and justifies deviant choices in order to rebel against our Father. He works for us to be miserable like himself (2 Ne 2:1) & to misuse our hard-won gift of agency...

Some choose a path that carries them far from the truths they have been taught, excusing their behaviors. What a blessing that you are here, looking for better ways to live truth, not to justify a man-made variation of it. Your courage in dealing with a most difficult & painful struggle is certainly recognized by our mindful, loving Father.

C. S. Lewis, a man of amazing insight & wisdom, offered beautiful imagery as a means of explaining why Father's plan is one that stretches us beyond what we think our limits are, & why we must follow the blueprint of the Master Architect:

'Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on a new floor there, running up towers, making

courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace.”

The Lord’s blueprint is one we can’t fathom. Deviating from it may seem easier at times, but it won’t allow us to be – as Elder Neal A. Maxwell once observed – “excavated” properly, in order to be molded & shaped into the amazing soul for which our celestial blueprint allows!

What may seem so difficult now, in our current mortal circumstance, will make sense one day. Until that day of understanding, we trust in the reality that God’s laws – his truths – do not change.

3. Thoughts and feelings, of themselves, will not condemn us.

Although the Adversary would love for you- for any of us - to pull away in guilt or shame, the truth of it is this: there is no need to feel guilt or shame because you have feelings of SSA. The key is to move them off the *stage of your mind* & deal with them as well as you are able.

You might remember the words of Pres. Boyd K. Packer:

The Mind is like a Stage

“As you learn to control your thoughts, you can overcome habits, even degrading personal habits. You can gain courage, conquer fear, and have a happy life. I had been told a hundred times or more as I grew up that thoughts must be controlled, but no one told me how. I’ve thought about this over the years and have decided that the mind is like a stage. During every waking moment the curtain is up. There is always some act being performed on that stage....

When any unworthy desires press into your mind, fight them, resist them, control them (see James 4:6–8; 2 Ne. 9:39; Mosiah 3:19).

That may be a struggle from which you will not be free in this life. If you do not act on temptations, you need feel no guilt. They may be extremely difficult to resist. But that is better than to yield and bring disappointment and unhappiness to you and those who love you.”

(Nov 2000 Ensign, ‘Ye are the temple of God’ Pres Boyd K Packer)

Any inappropriate thoughts- about anyone, anything, at any time – homosexual or heterosexual in nature; or about any subject – need not allow us to feel shameful, if we use our agency to shuffle the thought away, and ‘change the channel’ of our minds to another, more light-filled one.

I love Pres. Howard W Hunter’s advice to: "Fix your attention on your...goal[s] and never look back on your earlier problems... Our energies [should be] focused not behind us but ahead of us..." ["Am I a ‘Living’ Member?" April G.C. 1987]

There is great comfort that comes as we shake off unnecessary guilt or burdens we needn't carry. This mortal course is just that- a COURSE.

I remember a story about a YW, Jenny, who was born blind. She never used her blindness as an excuse and participated in as many activities as she was able.

For one activity, they had planned an Obstacle Course. In order to equalize this playing field, they blindfolded each girl before she entered the cultural hall. Their fathers, or father figure, stood at the far end of the course. The instructions to get thru the course came from the. Each girl had to listen to her father & follow his instructions to get thru the course. No one was successful, but they laughed a lot. It was hilarious to watch the girls trip & fall, laughing as they unsuccessfully & awkwardly staggered along the course.

Last, Jenny entered... no blind fold needed, of course. The level of frivolity dropped dramatically. The girls knew that Jenny couldn't throw off her blind fold at the end of her attempt at the course.

Jaw-dropped, they watched in amazement as Jenny listened to her dad's quiet instructions & followed them to get thru the maze. A couple of times she paused, he repeated & clarified, & she eventually got to the end of the course- the only one to successfully complete it!

As the YW gathered around her, applauding her ability to do what seemed way too hard for them, one asked her, "Jenny, how on earth were you able to get thru the course?"

The Spirit enveloped this young group when Jenny explained, "I just listened to my Father's voice & did what he told me to do."

You could have heard a pin drop. The fun obstacle course activity became a powerful teaching tool for every person present.

We need to, individually, listen to our Father's voice & **do** what He tells us to do.

Our thoughts will not condemn us, brothers & sisters. We can cast them off & work at doing what our Father tells us to do.

4. God's ways allow for us to continue to grow.

A wonderful thing about love is that we can share it w/ family & friends who want to help us grow in our mortal journey.

President David O. McKay once said, "A single struggling individual may be stalled w/ his heavy load as he begins to climb the hill before him. To reach the top unaided is an impossibility. W/ a little help from fellow travelers he makes the grade & goes on his way in gratitude and rejoicing."

God's arithmetic is, as Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, "amazing." I love it because it multiplies, and we are added to, as we lovingly help one another during those times we are stalled. It is part of our growth.

Some years ago I was honored to co-write the theme song for Special Olympics. We dedicated the song to Bart, my co-writer's cousin. Bart is a Special Olympian. From him, I've learned a lot about growing, and dealing w/ hardships.

- I watched him participate in an activity that called for him to shoot 3 basket balls in the basket. Those of us on the sidelines became wired with anxiety watching him shoot time after time, and miss the hoop. He kept trying and trying. I wondered if we, as bystanders might need a nerve pill or something! Finally, after one and a half hours, he got the third one in. His reaction? "All right!" he quietly said to himself, happy for completing the exercise. Oh, how much I learned from Bart! To keep trying, without losing faith, losing temper, or losing hope, offers us the blessing of trying until we reach our goal.
- I was present when Bart became an Eagle Scout. He was in his late 30's at the time. After the award was given, there was a reception in the cultural hall. I watched Bart come up to his cousin, place his hands on his cousin's shoulders, and say these words: "Remember who you are, Heavenly Father loves you."

It's important to note that Bart, because of his mental and physical impairments, has the mental age of a 4 year old. His speech is very hard to understand. On that occasion, his words were piercingly easy to discern. The Veil seemed thinned for a moment, and I seemed to be able to see the 'real' Bart. As I had so many times when with him, I felt a heavenly love. His counsel, given in love and great wisdom, will always be in my heart. To 'remember who we are' will serve us well in growing through our infirmities. We can be strengthened in ways beyond our scope of understanding if we will continue to call on our Father, and to lean on our Savior.

Some see Bart as handicapped. I see him as pure & full of joy. I hope that, in my handicaps, I can become the kind of person that Bart is. He is an eternal friend who has helped me grow.

The prophet Joseph Smith taught, "Our heavenly Father is more liberal in His views, and boundless in His mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive."

How beautiful to know that His love is more far reaching than we can imagine, & that it gives allowance for errors and for our growth!

5. Jesus Christ will do His holy job! This is a truth.

We are taught that Jesus Christ, the Holy One of Israel, is the means by which we can return to our Father. 2 Nephi 25: 23 "For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do."

After all we can do- our best efforts, our tears, our pain, our trust in Him. He can do more with us than we could ever imagine doing for ourselves...even if others may find it impossible.

There is one more personal example I'd like to share. It is in no way meant to be a profound or difficult burden like some of you bear - but is an illustration of our loving Savior's blessings:

At 13, I had an issue w/ my tonsils & my voice. The tonsils were huge and infected. They wouldn't clear up. And I was unable to speak. Doctor after doctor was unable to help me. For three months, a home tutor came to our house and whispered though the lessons with me. Finally, surgery to remove the diseased tonsils was scheduled.

While coming out of sedation, being wheeled out of surgery, I uttered the word "Mom" – aloud. It seems the tonsils, which had grown and spread over the vocal chords, were the culprit for my inability to create sound.

The "Experts" told my parents, "She will speak with a severe rasp all of her life. She will never be able to sing." Little did they know that music was very much a part of our family. We had been harmonizing since I was a tiny child. They were wrong, however. With God, my voice returned. Against all "expert" odds, I have been able to enjoy the blessing of singing all my life.

Most have no idea that every time I bear testimony through song, it is a tender mercy given me at an early age—one that taught me that we should never give up, because the Savior will do his job... & if it is in keeping with Holy will, we will be assisted in being more & in doing more than we dream possible.

Whatever our trial, test, burden- we can gain strength because our Savior will do his job. Our 'voice' can return. A stronger, more pure voice that binds us with more confidence before heaven.

Through Christ's Atoning sacrifice, there is no sickness, pain, isolation, or distress that cannot be eradicated.

Our battles need never be fought alone. He will do his part.

The Atonement offers a bridge to close the gap between mankind in the fallen state & a restoration to our Celestial place.

The TRUTH is that when we have used our strength in doing what we can, we may leave the rest to Jesus Christ. We need not require more of ourselves than He requires of us. He will carry us when our strength is used up. He will help us find our 'voice' and reconcile to our God.

I don't know how it feels to deal with Same Sex Attraction. I can't adequately address your concerns, hurts, efforts, or feelings. I can, however, share in your need for the

Atonement. All of us, in our hurts, suffering, and weakness, need the Lord's healing power. We have to trust in Him to do his part.

In 2 Ne 2:2 we are promised that "he will consecrate our afflictions for our gain".

Think of Paul, the apostle. Previously known as "Saul", he had done much wickedness. When we was converted, he was converted wholly. He "took up the cross" and followed Jesus. Years later, as a leader in the Church and defender of truth, he said, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." [2Cor. 12-9]

It is tough to glory in our infirmities. But it is a TRUTH that Christ will grant us power beyond our own, when we turn to Him in our hour of need and weakness. I bear testimony that it is so.

We have temporarily forgotten who we are, & how close is our relationship with our loving Father. Jesus has not. Further, He has descended "below all things" [D&C 121], and knows how we feel when it seems we are far removed from our God. Thus, He can do his holy job and minister to us. What can be done because of His light & truth is far more potent than our feelings of discouragement, and more lasting than our incidental pain.

Though separated physically at present, our eternal family bond is strong. Our Father knows when a sparrow falls. He knows, certainly, when our hearts are heavy and we are hurting in our fallen state. We can *trust* Him & we can trust in our Savior.

6. Gospel principles will never fail us.

Some may choose to justify their behaviors [not their thoughts or feelings] & thus leave the safety of gospel truths. Brothers and sisters, I know this:

1. People may fail us.
2. Programs may change.
3. The Principles will do **neither**. The eternal gospel principles are truths that mankind cannot alter. With our faith securely planted in this absolute, we may find much more strength, comfort, and uplift to move forward within the gospel.
4. There is no place far enough that is beyond the reach of the Good Shepherd. He- the Savior himself- believes in our ability to, with him, overcome our adversities. He gave us this blessed assurance when he said, "What manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, Even as I am." [3 Ne. 27:27.]

We, his precious sheep, may trust in him and in his ability to take hold of our outstretched hand. With his stripes, we are healed. He is our example in doing what is right. He bids us hold on to these eternal principles, and take advantage of the covenants that give us strength. They will not fail us.

Sing hymn: COME UNTO JESUS

Conclusion:

During our mortal probation, there are struggles of every sort. To those of you good brothers & sisters whose struggles include SSA, there are many who feel your sorrow, who admire your courage, and who cheer you on in the race of life. As we move forward in the strait and narrow way, we can pray together, work together, and trust together.

Why do you struggle with SSA? I do not know. But I do know that with heavenly assistance and an increasing understanding of who you really are, you will find increased strength to deal with it, as we deal with all our infirmities- finding comfort, peace, and love in the Infinite Atonement, offered us with a startling depth of love from our elder brother, the Lord Jesus Christ.

As Elder Wirthlin proclaimed, “Yes it IS wonderful to know that our Heavenly Father loves us.”

Of course we can feel buoyed up! We can see ourselves with new eyes! Being renewed in hope, we can lose our old selves in selfless service as well as steady study and understanding. We then will be intent on seeing more of our Savior’s reflection when we look in the mirror. We can put away the old self & embrace the virtues that show us to be true Christians.

I know in the core of my being that Elder Jeffrey R. Holland spoke absolute truth when he said,

“Brothers and sisters, I testify that no one of us is less treasured or cherished of God than another. I testify that He loves each of us—insecurities, anxieties, self-image, and all. He doesn't measure our talents or our looks; He doesn't measure our professions or our possessions. He cheers on every runner, calling out that the race is against sin, not against each other. I know that if we will be faithful, there is a perfectly tailored robe of righteousness ready and waiting for everyone, "robes . . . made . . . white in the blood of the Lamb." [Rev 7:14]

This is a *promise* given us. By a loving God. I am grateful for it. The Savior will safely guide us to that sacred, heavenly place where we may rest. His love, like our Father’s love, is sufficient.