

# "Abide in My Love"

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The Bible tells us that "God is love."<sup>1</sup> He is the perfect embodiment of love, and we rely heavily on the constancy and universal reach of that love. As President Thomas S. Monson has expressed: "God's love is there for you whether or not you feel you deserve love. It is simply always there."<sup>2</sup>

There are many ways to describe and speak of divine love. One of the terms we hear often today is that God's love is "unconditional." While in one sense that is true, the descriptor *unconditional* appears nowhere in scripture. Rather, His love is described in scripture as "great and wonderful love,"<sup>3</sup> "perfect love,"<sup>4</sup> "redeeming love,"<sup>5</sup> and "everlasting love."<sup>6</sup> These are better terms because the word *unconditional* can convey mistaken impressions about divine love, such as, God tolerates and excuses anything we do because His love is unconditional, or God makes no demands upon us because His love is unconditional, or *all* are saved in the heavenly kingdom of God because His love is unconditional. God's love is infinite and it will endure forever, but what it means for each of us depends on how we respond to His love.

Jesus said:

"As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.

"If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love."<sup>7</sup>

To "continue in" or "abide in" the Savior's love means to receive His grace and be perfected by it.<sup>8</sup> To receive His grace, we must have faith in Jesus Christ and keep His commandments, including repenting of our sins, being baptized for the remission of sins, receiving the Holy Ghost, and continuing in the path of obedience.<sup>9</sup>

God will always love us, but He cannot save us in our sins.<sup>10</sup> Remember the words of Amulek to Zeezrom that the Savior would not save His people *in* their sins but *from* their sins,<sup>11</sup> the reason being that with sin we are unclean and "no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of heaven"<sup>12</sup> or dwell in God's presence. "And [Christ] hath power given unto him from the Father to redeem [His people] from their sins because of repentance; therefore he hath sent his angels to declare the tidings of the conditions

of repentance, which bringeth unto the power of the Redeemer, unto the salvation of their souls."<sup>13</sup>

From the Book of Mormon we learn that the intent of Christ's suffering—the ultimate manifestation of His love—was "to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance.

"And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption."<sup>14</sup>

Repentance, then, is His gift to us, purchased at a very dear price.

Some will argue that God blesses everyone without distinction—citing, for example, Jesus's statement in the Sermon on the Mount: "[God] maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, God does rain down upon all His children all the blessings He can—all the blessings that love and law and justice and mercy will permit. And He commands us to be likewise generous:

"I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

"That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven."<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, God's greater blessings are conditioned on obedience. President Russell M. Nelson explained: "The resplendent bouquet of God's love—including eternal life—includes blessings for which we must qualify, not entitlements to be expected unworthily. Sinners cannot bend His will to theirs and require Him to bless them in sin [see Alma 11:37]. If they desire to enjoy every bloom in His beautiful bouquet, they must repent."<sup>17</sup>

Beyond rendering the penitent person guiltless and spotless with the promise of being "lifted up at the last day,"<sup>18</sup> there is a second vital aspect of abiding in the love of God. Abiding in His love will enable us to realize our full potential, to become even as He is.<sup>19</sup> As President Dieter F. Uchtdorf stated: "The grace of God does not merely restore us to our previous innocent state. ... His aim is much higher: He wants His sons and daughters to become like Him."<sup>20</sup>

To abide in God's love in this sense means to submit fully to His will. It means to accept His correction when needed, "for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth."<sup>21</sup> It means to love and serve one another as Jesus has loved and served us.<sup>22</sup> It means to learn "to abide the law of a celestial kingdom" so that we can "abide a celestial glory."<sup>23</sup> For Him to be able to make of us what we can become, our Heavenly Father pleads with us to yield "to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and [put] off the natural man and

[become] a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and [become] as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father."<sup>24</sup>

Elder Dallin H. Oaks observed: "The Final Judgment is not just an evaluation of a sum total of good and evil acts—what we have *done*. It is an acknowledgment of the final effect of our acts and thoughts—what we have *become*."<sup>25</sup>

The story of Helen Keller is something of a parable suggesting how divine love can transform a willing soul. Helen was born in the state of Alabama in the United States in 1880. When just 19 months old, she suffered an undiagnosed illness that left her both deaf and blind. She was extremely intelligent and became frustrated as she tried to understand and make sense of her surroundings. When Helen felt the moving lips of family members and realized that they used their mouths to speak, "she flew into a rage [because] she was unable to join in the conversation."<sup>26</sup> By the time Helen was six, her need to communicate and her frustration grew so intense that her "outbursts occurred daily, sometimes hourly."<sup>27</sup>

Helen's parents hired a teacher for their daughter, a woman named Anne Sullivan. Just as we have in Jesus Christ one who understands our infirmities,<sup>28</sup> Anne Sullivan had struggled with her own serious hardships and understood Helen's infirmities. At age five, Anne had contracted a disease that caused painful scarring of the cornea and left her mostly blind. When Anne was eight, her mother died; her father abandoned her and her younger brother, Jimmie; and they were sent to a "poor house," where conditions were so deplorable that Jimmie died after only three months. Through her own dogged persistence, Anne gained entry to the Perkins School for the Blind and vision impaired, where she succeeded brilliantly. A surgical operation gave her improved vision so that she was able to read print. When Helen Keller's father contacted the Perkins School seeking someone to become a teacher for his daughter, Anne Sullivan was selected.<sup>29</sup>

It was not a pleasant experience at the beginning. Helen "hit, pinched and kicked her teacher and knocked out one of her teeth. [Anne] finally gained control by moving with [Helen] into a small cottage on the Kellers' property. Through patience and firm consistency, she finally won the child's heart and trust."<sup>30</sup> Similarly, as we come to trust rather than resist our divine Teacher, He can work with us to enlighten and lift us to a new reality.<sup>31</sup>

To help Helen learn words, Anne would spell the names of familiar objects with her finger on the palm of Helen's hand. "[Helen] enjoyed this 'finger play,' but she didn't understand until the famous moment when [Anne] spelled 'w-a-t-e-r' while pumping water over [Helen's] hand. [Helen] later wrote:

"Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten ... and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened

my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! ... Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house[,] every object ... I touched seemed to quiver with life."<sup>32</sup>

As Helen Keller grew to adulthood, she became known for her love of language, her skill as a writer, and her eloquence as a public speaker.

In a movie depicting the life of Helen Keller, her parents are portrayed as satisfied with Anne Sullivan's work once she has domesticated their wild daughter to the extent that Helen will sit politely at dinner, eat normally, and fold her napkin at the end of the meal. But Anne knew Helen was capable of much, much more and that she had significant contributions to make.<sup>33</sup> Even so, we may be quite content with what we have done in our lives and that we simply are what we are, while our Savior comprehends a glorious potential that we perceive only "through a glass, darkly."<sup>34</sup> Each of us can experience the ecstasy of divine potential unfolding within us, much like the joy Helen Keller felt when words came to life, giving light to her soul and setting it free. Each of us can love and serve God and be empowered to bless our fellowman. "As it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him."<sup>35</sup>

Let us consider the cost of God's precious love. Jesus revealed that to atone for our sins and redeem us from death, both physical and spiritual, His suffering caused Himself, "even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that [He] might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink."<sup>36</sup> His agony in Gethsemane and on the cross was greater than any mortal could bear.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, because of His love for His Father and for us, He endured, and as a consequence, He can offer us both immortality and eternal life.

It is poignantly symbolic that "blood [came] from every pore"<sup>38</sup> as Jesus suffered in Gethsemane, the place of the olive press. To produce olive oil in the Savior's time, olives were first crushed by rolling a large stone over them. The resulting "mash" was placed in soft, loosely woven baskets, which were piled one upon another. Their weight expressed the first and finest oil. Then added stress was applied by placing a large beam or log on top of the stacked baskets, producing more oil. Finally, to draw out the very last drops, the beam was weighted with stones on one end to create the maximum, crushing pressure.<sup>39</sup> And yes, the oil is bloodred as it first flows out.

I think of Matthew's account of the Savior as He entered Gethsemane that fateful night—that He "began to be sorrowful and very heavy. ...

"And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt."<sup>40</sup>

Then, as I imagine the distress grew even more severe, He pleaded a second time for relief and, finally, perhaps at the peak of His suffering, a third time. He endured the

agony until justice was satisfied to the very last drop.<sup>41</sup> This He did to redeem you and me.

What a precious gift is divine love! Filled with that love, Jesus asks, "Will ye not now return unto me, and repent of your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you?"<sup>42</sup> Tenderly He reassures, "Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come ... will I receive; and blessed are those who come unto me."<sup>43</sup>

Will you not love Him who first loved you?<sup>44</sup> Then keep His commandments.<sup>45</sup> Will you not be a friend to Him who laid down His life for His friends?<sup>46</sup> Then keep His commandments.<sup>47</sup> Will you not abide in His love and receive all that He graciously offers you? Then keep His commandments.<sup>48</sup> I pray that we will feel and fully abide in His love, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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