

“That I Might Draw All Men unto Me”

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As we draw closer to God, the enabling power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ will come into our lives.

My dear brothers and sisters, while living in Africa, I sought advice from Elder Wilford W. Andersen of the Seventy about helping Saints who live in poverty. Among the remarkable insights he shared with me was this: “The greater the distance between the giver and the receiver, the more the receiver develops a sense of entitlement.”

This principle underlies the Church’s welfare system. When members are not able to meet their own needs, they turn first to their families. Thereafter, if necessary, they can also turn to their local Church leaders for assistance with their temporal needs.¹ Family members and local Church leaders are closest to those in need, frequently have faced similar circumstances, and understand best how to help. Because of their proximity to the givers, recipients who receive help according to this pattern are grateful and less likely to feel entitled.

The concept—“the greater the distance between the giver and the receiver, the more the receiver develops a sense of entitlement”—also has profound spiritual applications. Our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, are the ultimate Givers. The more we distance ourselves from Them, the more entitled we feel. We begin to think that we deserve grace and are owed blessings. We are more prone to look around, identify inequities, and feel aggrieved—even offended—by the unfairness we perceive. While the unfairness can range from trivial to gut-wrenching, when we are distant from God, even small inequities loom large. We feel that God has an obligation to fix things—and fix them right now!

The difference made by our proximity to Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ is illustrated in the Book of Mormon in the stark contrast between Nephi and his older brothers Laman and Lemuel:

- Nephi had “great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore, [he] did cry unto the Lord,” and his heart was softened.² On the other hand, Laman and Lemuel were distant from God—they did not know Him.
- Nephi accepted challenging assignments without complaint, but Laman and Lemuel “did murmur in many things.” Murmuring is the scriptural equivalent of childish whining. The scripture records that “they did murmur because they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them.”³
- Nephi’s closeness to God enabled him to recognize and appreciate God’s “tender mercies.”⁴ In contrast, when Laman and Lemuel saw Nephi receiving blessings, they “were wroth with him because they understood not the dealings of the Lord.”⁵ Laman and Lemuel saw the blessings that they received as their due and petulantly assumed that they should have more. They seemed to view Nephi’s blessings as “wrongs” committed against them. This is the scriptural equivalent of disgruntled entitlement.
- Nephi exercised faith in God to accomplish what he was asked to do.⁶ In contrast, Laman and Lemuel, “being hard in their hearts, ... did not look unto the Lord as they ought.”⁷ They seemed to feel that the Lord was obligated to provide answers to questions that they had not posed. “The Lord maketh no such thing known unto us,” they said, but they did not even make the effort to ask.⁸ This is the scriptural equivalent of derisive skepticism.

Because they were distant from the Savior, Laman and Lemuel murmured, became contentious, and were faithless. They felt that life was unfair and that they were entitled to God’s grace. In contrast, because he had drawn close to God, Nephi must have recognized that life would be the most unfair for Jesus Christ. Though absolutely innocent, the Savior would suffer the most.

The closer we are to Jesus Christ in the thoughts and intents of our hearts, the more we appreciate His innocent suffering, the more grateful we are for grace and forgiveness, and the more we want to repent and become like Him. Our absolute distance from Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ is important, but the direction we are heading is even more crucial. God is more pleased with repentant sinners who are trying to draw closer to Him than with self-righteous, faultfinding individuals who, like the Pharisees and scribes of old, do not realize how badly they need to repent.⁹

As a child, I sang a Swedish Christmas carol that teaches a simple but powerful lesson—drawing near to the Savior *causes* us to change. The lyrics go something like this:

*When Christmas morning gleams
I want to go to the stable,
Where God in the nighttime hours
Already rests upon the straw.*

*How good Thou wast to desire
To come down to the earth!
Now, I do not wish to waste
My childhood days in sin anymore!*

*Jesus, we need Thee,
Thou dear children's friend.
I no longer wish to grieve Thee
With my sins again.¹⁰*

When we figuratively transport ourselves to the Bethlehem stable, “where God in the nighttime hours already rests upon the straw,” we can recognize better the Savior as a gift from a kind, loving Heavenly Father. Rather than feeling entitled to His blessings and grace, we develop an intense desire to stop causing God further grief.

Whatever our current direction or distance to Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, we can choose to turn toward Them and draw closer to Them. They will help us. As the Savior told the Nephites following His Resurrection:

“And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, ...

“And for this cause have I been lifted up; therefore, according to the power of the Father I will draw all men unto me.”¹¹

To draw closer to the Savior, we must increase our faith in Him, make and keep covenants, and have the Holy Ghost with us. We must also act in faith, responding to the spiritual direction we receive. All of these elements come together in the sacrament. Indeed, the best way I know of to draw closer to God is to prepare conscientiously and partake worthily of the sacrament each week.

A friend of ours in South Africa shared how she came to this realization. When Diane was a new convert, she attended a branch outside of Johannesburg. One Sunday, as she sat in the congregation, the layout of the chapel made it so that the deacon did not see her as the sacrament was passed. Diane was disappointed but said nothing. Another member noted the omission and mentioned it to the branch president after the meeting. As Sunday School began, Diane was invited to an empty classroom.

A priesthood holder came in. He knelt down, blessed some bread, and handed her a piece. She ate it. He knelt down again and blessed some water and handed her a small cup. She drank it. Thereafter, Diane had two thoughts in rapid succession: First, "Oh, he [the priesthood holder] did this just for me." And then, "Oh, He [the Savior] did this just for me." Diane felt Heavenly Father's love.

Her realization that the Savior's sacrifice was just for her helped her feel close to Him and fueled an overwhelming desire to keep that feeling in her heart, not just on Sunday but every day. She realized that although she sat in a congregation to partake of the sacrament, the covenants she made anew each Sunday were individually hers. The sacrament helped—and continues to help—Diane feel the power of godly love, recognize the Lord's hand in her life, and draw closer to the Savior.

The Savior identified the sacrament as indispensable to a spiritual foundation. He said:

"And I give unto you a commandment that ye shall do these things [partake of the sacrament]. And if ye shall always do these things blessed are ye, for ye are built upon my rock.

"But whoso among you shall do more or less than these are not built upon my rock, but are built upon a sandy foundation; and when the rain descends, and the floods come, and the winds blow, and beat upon them, they shall fall."¹²

Jesus did not say "*if* rain descends, *if* floods come, and *if* winds blow" but "*when*." No one is immune from life's challenges; we all need the safety that comes from partaking of the sacrament.

On the day of the Savior's Resurrection, two disciples traveled to a village called Emmaus. Unrecognized, the risen Lord joined them on the journey. As they traveled, He taught them from the scriptures. When they reached their destination, they invited Him to dine with them.

"And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them.

"And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight.

"And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?

"And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven [Apostles] gathered together."

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And then they testified to the Apostles that “the Lord is risen indeed. ...

“And they told what things were done in the way, and how he was known of them in breaking of bread.”¹³

The sacrament truly helps us know our Savior. It also reminds us of His innocent suffering. If life were truly fair, you and I would never be resurrected; you and I would never be able to stand clean before God. In this respect, I am grateful that life is not fair.

At the same time, I can emphatically state that because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, ultimately, in the eternal scheme of things, there will be no unfairness. “All that is unfair about life can be made right.”¹⁴ Our present circumstances may not change, but through God’s compassion, kindness, and love, we will all receive more than we deserve, more than we can ever earn, and more than we can ever hope for. We are promised that “God shall wipe away all tears from [our] eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”¹⁵

No matter where you stand in your relationship to God, I invite you to draw nearer to Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, the Ultimate Benefactors and Givers of all that is good. I invite you to attend sacrament meeting each week and partake of the holy emblems of the Savior’s body and blood. I invite you to feel God’s nearness as He is made known to you, as He was to the disciples of old, in the “breaking of [the] bread.”

As you do, I promise that you will feel nearer to God. Natural tendencies to childish whining, disgruntled entitlement, and derisive skepticism will dissipate. Those sentiments will be replaced by feelings of greater love and gratitude for Heavenly Father’s gift of His Son. As we draw closer to God, the enabling power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ will come into our lives. And, as with the disciples on the way to Emmaus, we will find that the Savior has been nearby all along. I so witness and testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

