

The Enabling Power of the Atonement: Bask in His Life-Giving Light

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I am a convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, having been baptized in my early thirties. But when I was about five years old I had an experience that became a “defining moment.” I was outside with my mother. While she was hanging clothes on the clothesline, I was in the backyard swing, singing a song I’d learned in Sunday School.

“Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong, we are weak, but He is strong.” I did not fully recognize all that was happening to me, but I literally felt His love. I began pumping and singing—harder and harder. “Yes, Jesus loves me, Yes, Jesus loves me, Yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so.”¹ I was so filled with His love for me, I felt I could do anything—even go all the way over the top of the swing if I pumped hard enough! That didn’t happen, but what did happen was much more significant: I felt Christ’s love and I knew He knew me. I hope you have felt the reality of His love and especially that you might experience it today and have it confirmed again and again.

Elder David A. Bednar, while serving as president of Brigham Young University–Idaho and prior to his calling to the Quorum of the Twelve, said, “I suspect [we] are much more familiar with the nature of the redeeming power of the Atonement than we are with the enabling power of the Atonement.”

He suggested that most of us understand that Christ came to earth to die for us, to pay the price for our sins and to make us clean; to redeem us from our fallen state and to enable every person to be resurrected from the dead. In other words, we know the Atonement is for sinners.

But, Elder Bednar added, “I frankly do not think many of us ‘get it’ concerning this enabling and strengthening power of the Atonement, and I wonder if we mistakenly believe we must make the

journey from good to better and become a saint all by ourselves, through sheer grit, willpower, and discipline, and with our obviously limited capacities.”²

Well, that’s me! I’m the first to admit my guilt in believing that through “sheer grit, willpower, and discipline” I can manage just about anything. Preparing this talk is an example. I searched the scriptures, scanned articles and books, followed links on the Church Web-site, and labored over an outline. I felt a tremendous burden as I struggled along working with “sheer grit.” I think this is not an uncommon feeling among women. We have a tendency to believe that we have to do everything all by ourselves. I know that nothing is further from the truth; I have repeatedly experienced the enabling power promised by the Savior, but I so easily forget and am so slow to remember.

As the deadline approached I experienced increased stress, and stress drives away the Spirit. I came to a point where I knew I could not do this alone; I desperately needed His help. I prayed for guidance, understanding, wisdom, and the enabling power of Jesus Christ. “Why is this so difficult?” I prayed.

With force and power these words came streaming into my mind: Because Satan does not want you to teach of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. He knows that when we understand the enabling power of the Atonement, we will be changed; we will have strength beyond our natural abilities, our weakness will be turned to strength, and we will know that “in the strength of the Lord [we] canst do all things.”³ Christ will heal our feelings of fear, distrust, anger, self-doubt, sorrow, discouragement, and inadequacy. He will help us get through difficult days and trying times—if we but come unto Him. But if Satan can prevent us from learning the doctrine of and drawing upon the enabling power of Christ’s Atonement, he will leave us crippled, weak, and ineffective—basically, “miserable, like unto himself.”⁴

My prideful thinking had led me to believe that I could prepare this talk without His help. However, as I sought forgiveness, a feeling of peace flooded over me. I felt great relief, and scriptures and thoughts came into my mind. I began to write, knowing I was being “enabled” by Christ’s promised grace. I determined I would do everything within my power, relying upon the enabling power of Christ to foil Satan’s intent.

I know many of you deal with things much more difficult than preparing a talk. In sharing my experience, I in no way want to minimize Christ’s power to enable, empower, and strengthen us to deal with much harder things—things such as divorce, disease, death of loved ones, depression, violence, children who choose not to follow the gospel plan, abuse of a variety of kinds (emotional, physical, spiritual, and sexual), tragic accidents, infidelity, and much, much more. To quote Carlfred Broderick, LDS family therapist and author: “The gospel of Jesus Christ is not insurance against pain. It is a resource in event of pain, and when that pain comes (and it will come because we came here on earth to have pain among other things), when it comes, rejoice that you have a resource to deal with your pain.”⁵

I have come to know many incredible women who have struggled under very difficult circumstances and who have each prevailed by coming to rely on Christ, which has enabled them to carry on when burdens seemed too heavy and pain too intense to bear.

A dear friend lovingly cared for her brilliant husband who experienced early-onset Alzheimer's disease. He also suffered physical illnesses. She was widowed at age 55. She told me, "There are times when the sadness is overwhelming. I get on my knees and plead, 'You have to carry this for a while. I can't do this alone.' And I feel His strength—strength enough to allow me to move forward and face each day, one at a time. To me, this is the power of the Atonement. I know He will not change my situation; the only thing I can change is me—I have to humble myself and depend on Him for help. Through this experience, I am coming to know the Savior as a person—not just someone I read about in the scriptures, but someone with whom I am developing a comforting relationship."⁶

There are many Latter-day Saints who have experienced the great anguish that accompanies a child choosing a path that leads him or her away from the Church. A mother, reflecting on her family of eight children, shared: "My awkward attempts to help my children solve their problems are often interpreted as an intrusion. The defenses go up as the lines of communication come crashing down. Then I blame myself for what I did or didn't do over the years. Such thoughts bring feelings of despair and helplessness. It is so easy to forget that before they were ever our children, they were (and are) His. I have come to believe that Christ's love will do what ours alone cannot. His love will break down all barriers and overcome all obstacles, as it heals and makes whole their broken hearts. And, in that moment, our hearts will be healed as well."⁷ That is the power of the Atonement.

Some time ago, I became acquainted with a woman in an institute class I was teaching. Frequently she would stop by my office after class. Over a period of many months, she shared bits of her life story. It was not pretty. As a child she had been ritually and sexually abused. She had spent years in therapy, at times institutionalized because she could not cope. I remember the day she came to my office pleading for help. I could see her pain, but I have no training in how to handle such things and I pled with the Lord to know how I might help. I played Church hymns and after a time, when she had finally calmed down, I invited her to sit in my office chair. On the wall, at eye level, was a painting of Christ. I invited her to look into His eyes as I began reading to her from the scriptures:

"Fear not, little flock. . . . Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not."⁸

"The Lord hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted. . . . For can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? . . . Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands."⁹

"Behold, he suffereth the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam."¹⁰

"Look unto God with firmness of mind, and pray unto him with exceeding faith, and he will console you in your afflictions, and he will plead your cause. . . . O all ye that are pure in heart, lift up your heads and receive the pleasing word of God, and feast upon his love."¹¹

As I read to her, without question, I knew I had been blessed by the love and mercy of Jesus Christ to do and say things beyond my natural ability. For my friend, it was a new beginning. Years later she wrote of that day, “I felt an overwhelming feeling of love and peace. Intellectually, I knew about the Atonement, but that day I came to a ‘heart knowledge’ as I *felt* His healing power. Over time I came to know that ultimately true healing can only come from the Master Physician, Jesus Christ.”¹² The healing which she experienced that day was only a beginning. Challenges still remain, but she is learning to trust in His promises as she turns to the scriptures and seeks His help through prayer.

Recently I became acquainted with a young mother with two active boys under the age of three. Her husband is in college and works two jobs. Both hold responsible callings in the ward. I don’t ever remember seeing her without a smile on her face and a warm greeting for everyone. You can imagine my surprise when I learned that she suffers from the painful and debilitating disease of rheumatoid arthritis. “How do you manage?” I asked her. “Well,” she hesitated, “I’m trying to learn to submit to His will, especially when every joint aches and I only have energy enough to lie on the couch and watch my boys play.” “But you never miss church and are always so pleasant,” I said. “How do you do it?” I was not prepared for the simplicity of her answer. “We try to do what we are asked—to hold family home evening, read the scriptures every day, and pray. I am so grateful for prayer. Several months ago I wanted so badly to have a party for my son’s first birthday. I prayed to Heavenly Father, ‘You know how to help me. This isn’t for me; it’s for my son.’ When I finished that prayer, I knew I would be sustained.”¹³ This young mother understood the enabling power of the Atonement.

I think of so many I know who have not yet come to believe all that Christ promises. My heart goes out to them, and I share with them Christ’s assurance and invitation: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you. . . . Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”¹⁴ Of this invitation, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland made this thought-provoking statement, “I submit to you, that may be one of the Savior’s commandments that is, even in the hearts of otherwise faithful Latter-day Saints, almost universally disobeyed; and I yet I wonder whether our resistance to this invitation could be anymore grievous to the Lord’s merciful heart.”

He added: “In [this] same spirit, I am convinced that none of us can appreciate how deeply it wounds the loving heart of the Savior of the world when he finds that his people do not feel confident in his care or secure in his hands.”¹⁵

Do we fully understand how sincere the Savior is when He offers to help us? He stands ever ready to have us come unto Him that He might strengthen us and embrace us in the arms of His love. The scriptures bear record of this:

The Lord has promised: “I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee.”¹⁶

To the people at Zarahemla, Alma declared, “Behold, [Christ] sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you.”¹⁷

The Lord invites us all to “be faithful and diligent in keeping the commandments of God, and I will encircle thee in the arms of my love.”¹⁸

In the ninth chapter of 3 Nephi, Christ says, “Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and blessed are those who come unto me.”¹⁹

Will you, for a moment, see yourself standing before Christ’s outstretched arms as He waits for you to “come unto Him” and be encircled in the arms of His love? It is here you will be healed, nourished, loved, enabled, strengthened, and made whole. Sisters, we need to learn to let the Savior carry our burdens and to go to Him regularly to seek His “enabling power.” To the faithful, Christ has declared: “I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs, . . . that ye may stand as witnesses for me hereafter, and that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions.” In fulfillment of that wonderful promise, “the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord.”²⁰

Please ponder the words of two hymns, each written as if Christ Himself were speaking to us:

Lean on my ample arm,
O thou depressed!
And I will bid the storm
Cease in thy breast.
Whate’er thy lot may be
On life’s complaining sea,
If thou wilt come to me,
Thou shalt have rest.²¹

In another familiar hymn, Christ also speaks to us, saying:

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 shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.²²

Did you notice the phrase, “my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply”? The Bible Dictionary teaches that “the main idea of the word [grace] is divine means of help or strength, given through the bounteous mercy and love of Jesus Christ.

“It is through the grace of the Lord Jesus, made possible by his atoning sacrifice, that mankind will be raised in immortality, every person receiving his body from the grave in a condition of everlasting life.”

Please consider these next sentences:

“It is likewise through the grace of the Lord that individuals, through faith in the atonement of Jesus Christ and repentance of their sins, receive strength and assistance to do good works that they otherwise would not be able to maintain if left to their own means. This grace is an enabling power.”²³

These are heady thoughts, but true doctrine—doctrine that, if understood, will not only bless our daily lives but help us withstand the challenges and pressures of our time. But how do we begin to allow the Atonement to work in our lives? What do we need to do? It is more simple than most of us think.

When we feel troubled, unsure, afraid, or discouraged, we need to remember the things that are taught in Primary: First, we must believe in Christ and all He has promised to do for us. Obeying His commandments and partaking of the sacrament bring us strength beyond our own. Prayer, fasting, study of the scriptures, and temple worship also bring us close to Him where we can feel His love and know of His promises.

Most of all we need to recognize our need for His grace—both for our ultimate salvation and also for His enabling power every day of our lives. Through His grace, each of us can be uplifted and strengthened.²⁴

I love this statement from the Church publication, *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference*, “If you ever become discouraged or feel too weak to continue living the gospel, remember the strength you can receive through the enabling power of grace.”²⁵ This is the very knowledge Satan does *not* want you to know, understand, or apply in your life!

To each of you, I bear testimony that Christ stands ever ready to respond to our feelings of grief, despair, inadequacy, discouragement, pain, and temptation. He constantly offers us His comfort, peace, hope, love, and strength. I know this from personal experience. There are times when I feel a direct answer from the Lord. At other times I sense He allows me to wrestle for a time so that I might learn and grow.

Sisters, Jesus loves us! This we know, for the scriptures tell us so. All of us “to Him belong; we are weak, but He is strong.”

I pray that we might realize the truth of Christ’s promise to each of us and that we will come to learn and apply the essential doctrine of Christ’s enabling power in our lives.

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