

The Grand Truths of Eternity

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I pray for the Spirit of the Lord to help each one of you rise above my clumsy words as I attempt to talk about some of the grandest truths of eternity.

The first grand truth is that in the eyes of God we are precious. We are worth everything to Him. He knows us completely. He loves us with His infinite and unending love. In fact, His work and His glory is our eternal welfare—not collectively, but individually. His love is for you—and for me—and for every other soul who has ever lived or will ever live on this earth. He will never stop loving us, precisely because He is our Father. We actually carry His spiritual DNA. Our divine attributes came from Him. That cannot change.

President Hinckley has said: “You are His child all the time, not just when you are good. You are His child when you are bad. You have within you a portion of divinity that is real and tremendous and marvelous and wonderful.”¹

Stop for a moment with me and simply allow yourself to feel His great love for you—to *really feel* that you belong to Him. This connection is real and, just like a testimony of Joseph Smith, a testimony of our own worth is revealed by “the spirit, [which] speaketh the truth and lieth not.”² If you do not have a witness of this important truth, seek it. But remember that when we ask for this testimony we may have to give up some of the negative stories we tell ourselves about our own worth. Much as we dislike them, sometimes we insist on keeping them alive. Let go of your history and plead with the Lord to let you know how precious you are. Concentrate on the divinity within yourself and leave the assaults of the past behind.

When we receive a testimony of His love for us, we automatically feel a reciprocal love for Him. “We love Him, because He first loved us.”³ Furthermore, when we recognize our own divine worth and feel His soul-satisfying love, we recognize the worth of every other creature and can't help but reach out in love. We are filled with songs of praise and thanksgiving. Life is abundant. Life is good.

You and I are not alone in wanting to live in the circle of His love, to live with a strong spiritual connection to Him. A large sample of women in the United States were asked to look at fourteen life goals, choosing the three that were most important to them. It may surprise you that their number one choice was believing in God or a higher power, with 69 percent of women in America listing it first on their list. The number two choice was being part of a happy family (63%) and number three was having a good marriage (43%). Financial and career goals were way down on the list.

In this same study, 95 percent of the women believe in prayer and 92 percent believe that God or a higher power knows them personally and is mindful of them. Also, 70 percent believe they have an inner voice, and the majority of them believe that this is very important when making life decisions.⁴

Have you noticed the amazing success of radio and TV talk show hosts who are interested in spirituality? It seems clear that their programming is a response to the heartfelt desires of their audience.

You and I know so many outside our faith who have rich spiritual lives, who are, in fact, kinder, more helpful, more Christ like than many of us who are Latter-day Saints. So how can we talk about the necessity of keeping commandments, seeking ordinances, and making covenants? In other words, how can we talk about the value of specific behavior to those good people in the world who are already experiencing His love?

Let's begin with the word *worthiness*. What does it mean to you? Is there some shriveling when I say it? Does it bring to mind judgment, guilt, comparison, constraints, feelings of "I don't quite measure up"? Do these feelings seem inconsistent with the preciousness of the individual soul that we have just spoken of?

Now you can see why preparation for today became almost paralyzing. I *want* to talk about worthiness. I *want* to talk about worthy behavior. I want to talk about a more profound relationship available to those who keep covenants with God through what we call "saving" ordinances. But I *don't want* to diminish the reality of His love even when worthy behavior isn't present. I am praying to be understood, but even more than that, I pray not to be misunderstood. If you feel a bit prickly, would you be willing to set those feelings aside and listen to a few stories, allowing me to share some personal views on covenants, commandments and their profound power to change and deepen a relationship with God?

First story: The story is told of a woman who was married to a powerful man. At least, he was powerful in her life. Every Monday morning he would hand her a long list of things she was to do that week. The lists came with an unspoken assumption that things would not go well between them if she didn't perform. So, because she wanted a good marriage, every week she would work her way through the list. As the years went by she became increasingly tired. She continued obediently, but she lost the love which she had felt for her husband in the beginning and then began to resent him—finally growing to actually hate him and eventually seeking a divorce. Several years went by and she married again. This time the man was quite different. He

truly cared about her well-being and cherished her in every way. He respected her and her talents and she flourished, falling more deeply in love with him as each year passed. One day, as she was thinking about his goodness, she thought of her life before. She began to chuckle, then to laugh. It suddenly occurred to her that every week she was doing the exact same things that she had so resented doing in her first marriage. But her daily tasks were no longer onerous; rather, they were joyful and reciprocal expressions of love.

God does not compel us to obey Him. We keep His commandments because we love Him. Our worthy behavior is a freely given gift to Him. We want to please Him because we love Him, not because we feel coerced or manipulated into obedience. “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.”⁵ We recognize that His commandments are given as an expression of His love for us. And we keep His commandments as an expression of our acceptance of and gratitude for His love.

Korihor interpreted covenants as a way to bind people down, accusing Alma of behaving like our friend’s first husband: “[You] teach this people to bind themselves down under the *foolish ordinances and performances* which are laid down by ancient priests, to usurp power and authority over them, to keep them in ignorance, that they may not lift up their heads, but be brought down according to thy words.”⁶

Alma defends the motivation behind a prophet’s encouragement of obedience to ordinances. He says that they do not desire to bring power to themselves, as Korihor has accused. Alma points to the hearts of the obedient as a test of the goodness of ordinances and performances. “And now, believest thou that we deceive this people, that causes such joy in their hearts?”⁷

Remember the joy which was the result of our friend’s labors when she was choosing to serve someone she loved and who loved her, rather than someone who only loved himself? Our joy is the proof of the goodness of God in asking us to obey His commandments.

Second story: When I was a little girl there were virtually no two-car families in our neighborhood. Each morning, dads got in family cars and drove downtown to offices, leaving mothers and children at home. We waited until Saturdays to do our shopping.

This way of life spawned an industry that is now virtually dead. We had a milk man, we had a Fuller Brush man, and we had the Jewel T man.

One summer morning when I was about five or six years old, I was playing outside with some of my siblings and friends. We spotted the Jewel T truck parked in front of our house. It was like a milk truck—no windows, but painted a dark brown with yellow writing across it: “Jewel T.” The door was open, the salesman was in the house with Mother, and it was irresistible. We all scrambled to see what was inside. And it was wonderful! Behind the driver’s seat there was an aisle that went from the front of the truck to the back and on each side there were shelves from floor to ceiling with groceries—cereal, baking powder, Jell-O, sugar—boxes and boxes. I was entranced with this miniature grocery store when suddenly someone said, “He’s coming! Let’s get out. Quick!” There was a great deal of jostling, and as I turned to go out the side of the truck I knocked an open bag of jelly beans onto the floor. They were right by the driver’s seat and I

assume he had been snacking on them as he drove from house to house. I leaned down to gather them up and put them back in the bag when someone said, “Hurry, he’s coming!” I left and ran with the other kids to hide behind the house next door.

It didn’t work very well. Within a few seconds the Jewel T man came around the corner of the house. “Someone’s been in my truck. Who spilled the jelly beans?”

As if orchestrated by a maestro, in one smooth motion all of my friends turned, pointed at me, and took a step back, leaving me standing alone in the middle of a half circle facing a threatening driver. He then moved in and shook his finger at me, saying that it was against the law to get into his truck and he was coming back that afternoon with the sheriff! Then he turned around, went back to his truck, and drove away. There was a bit of silence and then everyone went back to playing—everyone, that is, except me. In those few seconds, my world suddenly changed. I had never entertained anything other than the thought that I was completely safe—that everyone around me could be trusted to take care of me. But that evaporated like a drop of water on a hot iron. I waited until I was sure no was looking, then crept around to my own backyard, found a bridal wreath bush, and made my way to the inside where I sat completely hidden and waited for the sheriff. I sat there until dinnertime came and it was clear that, for whatever reason, I was probably safe again.

That’s a long way of telling you how important I think the concept of *trust* is and how frightening the world can be without it. I believe that one of the most significant blessings of covenant living is that we enter a circle of trust. When we make covenants, we, in essence, say to the Lord: I trust you and you can trust me. I trust you so completely that I will try to do the things that you ask of me, knowing that you have my best interests at heart. Making covenants is a concrete way I express my belief that the Lord will support and prosper me—that sooner or later all things will work together for my good. With this promise from us, He gives us His word: “I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say; but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise.”⁸

George Q. Cannon said: “No matter how serious the trial, how deep the distress, how great the affliction, [God] will never desert us. He never has, and He never will. He cannot do it. It is not His character [to do so]. He is an unchangeable being; the same yesterday, the same today, and He will be the same throughout the eternal ages to come. We have found that God. We have made Him our friend, by obeying His Gospel; and He will stand by us. We may pass through the fiery furnace; we may pass through deep waters; but we shall not be consumed nor overwhelmed. We shall emerge from all these trials and difficulties the better and purer for them, if we only trust in our God and keep His commandments.”⁹

Does this mean that He only comes through if we are perfect in keeping His commandments? No. That isn’t possible. I believe that it means that my *desire* is to keep His commandments and that entering into a covenant relationship means that I enter that holy cycle of repentance, forgiveness, and growth—repentance, forgiveness, and growth—an ever-continuing and upward circle to become like Him—which He can offer me through His atoning power.

When we cannot trust or be trusted we are just as surely immobilized as I was sitting in the middle of the bridal wreath bush. Not once during that long afternoon do I remember feeling sorry for getting into the truck. Fear and lack of support made it impossible for me to even entertain thoughts about my own behavior and desire to be a better person—to recognize that I indeed had done something wrong by getting into someone’s truck uninvited. I was immobilized and unable to change or grow because of the experience. On the other hand, when I live in God’s circle of trust, I can continually repent, be forgiven, and change, within the safety of His love and promises. Repentance is the doorway into covenants and the ongoing lifeblood of covenants.

Third story: Like most young girls, Janet grew up expecting and longing to be married and have a family. But as her friends and acquaintances seemed to move into marriage quite easily, it just didn’t happen for her. There certainly was pain and disappointment, but nonetheless her life was full. She felt directed by the Lord as she pursued an avenue of study that created a great deal of fulfillment. As she approached her forties, the sense of loss became more pronounced, but once again, the Lord gave her clear confirmations that let her know that this was the life He intended for her. She was at peace and went forward with a happy spirit, putting the idea of marriage behind her and contributing in unique and rewarding ways. Then there appeared a wonderful man and a marriage proposal that seemed good. It was confusing, but she loved the man and took the leap. One of the things about the idea of marriage that worried her a great deal was the fact that because of her busy career, she just couldn’t imagine having someone in her rare private spaces. She needed time away from people. She needed to be able to go home every night and close the door in order to regroup and heal. But she tucked the worry away and they were married. Sometime within the first year she remembered her fear about losing alone time, and it now seemed ridiculous. She mentioned it to her husband. His response was that perhaps she didn’t need as much time alone because when you are completely accepted you are somehow more whole together—a kind of peaceful completeness.

I like that thought. If that is so with a good marriage, think how peaceful it is to live within the completeness of a relationship with God. Within a covenant relationship, we are perfected by His love¹⁰¹—in other words, made whole and complete by His love.

Fourth story: In the book of Hosea—a book full of symbolism—Hosea is the betrayed husband whose rebellious wife leads the life of a harlot while her husband remains consistently faithful and forgiving. After incomprehensible strains on the marriage promises, the wife chooses to return to her first husband; “for then was it better with me than now.”¹¹ Through her repentance and his great mercy and loving kindness, he takes her back. “And I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God.”¹² You see, Hosea and his bride are metaphors for God and His covenant people. Elder Eyring, in speaking about Hosea, gives us this stunning insight:

“All my life I had heard explanations of covenants as being like a contract, an agreement where one person agrees to do something and the other agrees to do something else in return, [but upon studying Hosea] I felt something new, something more powerful. This was not a story about a business deal between partners, nor about business law. This was a love story. This was a story of a marriage covenant bound by love, by steadfast love.”¹³

You will notice that in this metaphorical story, even though the husband remained steadfast in his love for his bride, her wanton and unworthy behavior kept her from enjoying the blessings of his love. Even though he loved her, her behavior precluded the possibility of him blessing her, until she repented and returned.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell said: “Thus the hard, cold fact is that how we use our moral agency does not result in a withdrawal of God’s love, but does determine the ways and the degrees to which a loving God can express His love of us. Only the most righteous will receive His praise, His approval, and enjoy His presence. . . . If we are unrighteous, the spirit of the Lord is grieved. He is grieved, precisely because He loves us so deeply, but do we love Him enough to set things right? This is the continuing test.”¹⁴

Worth, worthy behavior, and ultimate worthiness. There are significant differences, aren’t there?

I’m aware that I have used marriage stories several times in this talk as metaphors to help us understand our relationship with God. In the scriptures, the Lord does the same, often referring to Himself as the bridegroom. I think it is helpful imagery. Within a good marriage we experience types and shadows of our more important relationship with God—things like companionship, trust, support, service motivated by love, and an abundance of other blessings. Within a difficult and broken marriage we experience betrayal, distrust, fear, and unhappiness. *We also experience these things when we break our covenants with God.*

Each of us hopes, prays, and works for a happy and fulfilling marriage with a spouse who will love and care for us. Some of us are denied that blessing, but every one of us has the opportunity to make and keep covenants with the Lord. Through baptismal and temple covenants He assures me that He will love and take care of me. And I promise Him, by covenant, that I will always trust Him to do so—and that my trust will be evidenced by my behavior: then, now, and always.

Do you remember the story of Esau? He was hungry. He sold his birthright because it seemed less relevant to his immediate and critical need than was a mess of pottage. The lesson for each of us is to stay within the covenant circle even when there are things outside that may seem better able to relieve our immediate suffering. In contrast to Esau, I promise that when problems come, I will look to Heavenly Father as a partner in solving them. I will choose to see life and its difficulties through eyes of faith.

I am grateful, beyond measure, for commandments and a lifetime of experiences that have led me to rely on Him. I know that I can trust Him. I have confidence that He will stand by me—support me, forgive me, consecrate my experiences to the welfare of my soul, bless and prosper me. Knowing this motivates me to work, repent, and work some more—unencumbered by the terror of going it alone.

Yes, God loves and responds to each of His children, but I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the added opportunity of a covenant relationship with Him. He said: “Be faithful and diligent in keeping the commandments of God, and I will encircle thee in the arms of my love.”¹⁵ The process is *so very* simple: A testimony of our divine worth leads us to joyfully repent and enter into a covenant relationship with our Father. Encircled by that relationship of trust and love we

perform worthy works—striving to do good continually. When we fail, we repent, are forgiven, and experience growth—over and over and over again. You are I are doing this. And we will keep doing it. We are becoming like Him. And on one distant and longed-for day, in the words of John the Revelator, “[we] shall walk with [Him] in white: for [we] are worthy.”¹⁶

References

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5. 1 John 5:3.
6. Alma 30:23; emphasis added.
7. Alma 30:35.
8. D&C 82:10.
9. “Freedom of the Saints,” in *Collected Discourses*, comp. Brian H. Stuy, 5 vols. [1987-92], 2:185.
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11. Hosea 2:7.
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15. D&C 6:20.
16. Revelation 3:4.

¹ 1 John 2:5