

“It Was as If a Blanket of Love Was Flowing over Me”

Kevin J. Worthen

This address was given Thursday, May 2, 2013 at the BYU Women’s Conference

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For further information write:

BYU Women’s Conference

161 Harman Continuing Education Building

Provo, Utah 84602

801-422-7692

E-mail: womens_conference@byu.edu

Home page: <http://womensconference.byu.edu>

Few truths are taught in the scriptures with as much frequency and in as many different ways as the eternal reality that God loves His children.¹ The scriptures abound with literary images designed to convince us of the immeasurable depth, reach, and constancy of God’s love for us. In Luke, we read of a loving father who runs to meet and embrace his wayward son.² In other parts of the gospels, we read of a shepherd who searches unceasingly for a single lost sheep,³ and when finding it, tenderly “layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.”⁴ In both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, Christ uses the image of a mother hen who longs to gather her chickens under her wings for protection.⁵ And as Elder Neil L. Andersen has noted,⁶ scriptures portray a Savior whose arms are open,⁷ extended,⁸ stretched out,⁹ and encircling.¹⁰ They describe God’s arms as arms of mercy,¹¹ arms of safety,¹² arms of love,¹³ arms that are “lengthened out all the day long.”¹⁴

There is no aspect of God’s character that is more central to His divine nature or more critical to the development of our faith in Him than His eternal love for us. This characteristic is so much a part of what makes God God that the ancient apostle John taught simply that “God is love.”¹⁵

The message of these scriptures is clear: God wants us to know that He loves us—each one of us—with a love that extends beyond human comprehension. Most of us understand this important truth quite well in its abstract, general form. We are taught it in Primary, and we repeat it in our songs, sermons, and daily discourse. Yet I believe most of us, most of the time, fail to understand the full meaning and significance of that simple eternal truth. More importantly, I believe that all of us, at least from time to time, underestimate the depth, breadth, and reach of God’s love for us.

The extensive reach and power of God’s love for his children was brought home to me several months ago when I visited the Institute in Gunnison, Utah. You may not have heard of the Gunnison Institute. Unlike most institutes, it is not located on or near a college campus. Instead, the Gunnison Institute is in the state prison in that town. The students are all inmates. All have made mistakes that are serious enough that they have been separated from society. Yet several

dozen of them gather on a regular basis to study, hear, and share the gospel of Jesus Christ. The topic for the day that I visited was the atonement—the act in Christ’s mortal ministry that most clearly represents God’s love for us. We talked about the healing power that comes from God’s redeeming love, of the infinite love that God has for His children—all His children. Here were men who had made bad choices in their lives, choices that would require some of them to remain in prison for the rest of their mortal existence. And yet several of them spoke with deep emotion and conviction of the great faith they had that at some point they could be forgiven—faith that came as they experienced in powerful ways the reality that notwithstanding their mistakes, God still loved them.

One of the inmates who had been in prison for some time concluded the meeting by sharing what he said had become his favorite scripture—Psalm 139, verses 7 and 8: “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.” He then testified that he knew from personal experience that this scripture was true. He said, “I know God can find, reach, and love his children even when they make their beds in hell—because it is in this prison that I have come to know the reality that God loves me.”

God’s love is so powerful that it reaches us not just in our temples, not just in our chapels, not just in our homes, but even in our prisons.

Perhaps Paul said it best in his epistle to the ancient Romans: “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God.”¹⁶

My message today is simple. God loves us. God loves each one of us. He loves us whoever we are and wherever we are. He wants us to feel that love more fully. And He wants us to be changed by that love. Indeed, God commands us to be changed by His love. “A new commandment I give unto you,” Christ said. “That ye love one another; as I have loved you.”¹⁷ God wants His love to be such a part of our lives that we love others with that same perfect love.

That standard is so high that I believe we won’t fully comply with this commandment in this life. But, emboldened by Nephi’s testimony that “the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them,”¹⁸ let me suggest four things we can do to enhance both our ability to more fully feel God’s love for us and our ability to allow that love to increase our love for others.

First, in order to feel more fully God’s love for us, we need to understand more fully the purpose of His love—His plan of salvation for His children. Unless we understand God’s love in the context of His plan, we can unintentionally reverse the order of Christ’s commandment to his ancient apostles. The commandment is for our love to become like God’s. But if we do not understand God’s plan for us, we can too easily believe that God’s love has become like ours. As strange as that statement may sound, there are some who, not understanding God’s purposes, measure His love for us by the standards of the less-than-perfect and less-demanding love we feel for our fellow beings, thereby figuratively dragging God’s celestial love down to the telestial level at which our love operates.

This reversal manifests itself in the mistaken belief that if God really loved us, our lives would be free from much of the turmoil we experience—or in the related erroneous belief that our struggles in life are a sign that either God’s love for us is diminished or that we have failed to merit it. This misunderstanding is so common that for some it is a stumbling block to believing that there is a God. If God loves His children, some assert, and if He is all powerful, why do so many of His children suffer? To these skeptics, the existence of pain, sorrow and injustice in the world conclusively establishes that not only does God not love us, He does not exist at all.

C. S. Lewis’s response to this assertion is instructive. Said he: “The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves, is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word ‘love.’”¹⁹ Too often we confuse God’s love with human kindness. To quote Lewis again: “There is kindness in love, but Love and kindness are not coterminous. . . . Kindness merely as such, cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering.”²⁰ Many of us want a God who is kind, by which kindness we mean “the desire to see others . . . happy; not happy in this way or in that, but just happy. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, ‘What does it matter so long as they are contented?’ We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, ‘liked to see young people enjoying themselves’ and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of the day, ‘a good time was had by all.’”²¹

But that is not God’s plan for us. He wants us to become like Him. He wants us to experience the fullness of joy He enjoys—eternal joy, not merely temporary contentedness. And He loves us enough that He will do whatever it takes for us to reach that goal, including allowing us to experience things that are difficult and soul-stretching. And He does it not because He doesn’t love us, but precisely because He does.

But even when we have to learn things from our extremities in order to fulfill God’s plan for us, His love will be there to sustain us if we will understand the purpose of that love. President Hinckley once illustrated the point.

“Some years ago in the Salt Lake Tabernacle,” he said, “Elder Marion D. Hanks conducted a panel discussion. Included in that panel was an attractive and able young woman, divorced, the mother of seven children then ranging in ages from 7 to 16. She said that one evening she went across the street to deliver something to a neighbor. Listen to her words, as I recall them:

‘As I turned around to walk back home, [she said], I could see my house lighted up. I could hear echoes of my children as I had walked out of the door a few minutes earlier. They were saying: “Mom, what are we going to have for dinner?” “Can you take me to the library?” “I have to get some poster paper tonight.” Tired and weary, I looked at that house and saw the light on in each of the rooms. I thought of all of those children who were home waiting for me to come and meet their needs. My burdens felt heavier than I could bear.

‘I remember looking through tears toward the sky, and I said, “Dear Father, I just can’t do it tonight. I’m too tired. I can’t face it. I can’t go home and take care of all those children alone. Could I just come to You and stay with You for just one night? I’ll come back in the morning.”’

‘I didn’t really hear the words of reply, but I heard them in my mind. The answer was: “No, little one, you can’t come to me now. You would never wish to come back. But I can come to you.”’²²

He can come to us. And He will, especially when we need His love the most.

So let us not sell God’s love short by confusing it with mere human kindness. His love is much deeper than that. If we understand His plan for us, we will know, as C. S. Lewis explained, that “because [God] ... loves us He ... labour[s] to make us lovable.”²³ The very requirements of that kind of love will sometimes stretch our souls. But that kind of love will also always sustain us even in our deepest distress, if we view things in their eternal perspective.

Second, we can enhance our ability to feel God’s love for us if strive daily to draw closer to Him through simple acts that focus our minds on Him. While we often feel God’s love for us very powerfully when we are struggling mightily, we can also experience that same loving feeling in less dramatic settings if we will do the small, simple things that direct our thoughts to Him. In the most recent general conference, President Eyring shared such an experience he had when as a young boy he attended a sacrament meeting one evening. “It was dark and cold outside,” he said. “I remember feeling light and warmth in the chapel that evening with my parents. We partook of the sacrament ... covenanting with our Heavenly Father to always remember His Son and keep His commandments. At the end of the meeting we sang the hymn ‘Abide with Me; ’Tis Eventide,’ with the words in it ‘O Savior, stay this night with me.’ I felt the Savior’s love and closeness that evening,” President Eyring said.²⁴ The simple act of remembering God and our covenant with Him, the simple act of singing praises to His name, resulted in an outpouring of God’s love to a young boy that was so powerful that it still sustained him more than 65 years later. If we will take the time daily to read of Him in the scriptures, to pray to Him, to ponder on His goodness, we will more fully experience and understand His powerful love for us.

As we do so, we will also feel greater love for those around us. His love for us can transform us into more loving beings. But our love for Him can also help in that transformation. That leads to my third suggestion: When we find it difficult to love those around us, we might focus not on loving them, but on loving God. One day at work some years ago, I found myself very frustrated with a coworker. I thought he was acting selfishly in ways that hurt others, and I was angry and upset. I knew I should love him, but I was having a hard time with that idea. In fact, love for him seemed impossible. I thought to myself, if only he were more like the Savior, it would be a lot easier to love him. As that thought ran through my mind, I suddenly asked myself, “Would it really? Do you really love the Savior now?” As I pondered that thought, I found that I did. I found that even though I was angry and could not feel love for my imperfect coworker, I could muster enough love to love a perfect being who loved me perfectly. As I then thought about that loving, perfect being, who loved me despite my imperfections, I was quickly reminded that He loved my coworker as much as He loved me. Soon my anger and frustration disappeared, and I found my feelings for my coworker were much more kind and loving.

In that regard, Mormon's description of charity in Moroni chapter 7 may have more meaning than first appears. "Charity," Mormon informs us, "is the pure love of Christ."²⁵ The word "of" is linguistically capable of at least two meanings in that context.²⁶ The most obvious, and clearly the most central, is that charity is the pure love that Christ possesses for us. But as I have reflected on my experience, I have concluded that an additional secondary meaning could be that charity is the pure love we should possess for Christ, and that our love for Him can cause us to have more charity for others. Thus when we struggle to love others, focusing on our love of God will help us develop the perfect love that He would have us feel for them.

Fourth, when faced with difficult situations involving other people, I suggest that we consider ways in which love can solve our problems, especially problems for which there seem to be no solutions. An experience shared by Elder F. Enzo Busche illustrates the point.

During one of his first mission tours as a General Authority, Elder Busche found himself faced with a most unusual situation. The mission president awoke him in the middle of the night and informed him that one of the missionaries had apparently been possessed by an evil spirit. He was seeking Elder Busche's help.

"I felt so helpless" Elder Busche wrote in his autobiography, "because I had never been in a situation like that. As I went up [the stairs], I heard noises and unintelligible sounds, and fear began to creep into my heart. ... When I got to the living room, I saw the elder sitting in a chair, shaking all over, making uncontrolled movements. ... His companion and the mission president and his family were all staring at the spectacle with shock and fear.

"As I entered the room, it was like a voice said to me, 'Brother Busche, you must make a decision now.' I knew immediately what decision it was. I had to decide whether to join the fear ... or to let faith act. ... In that moment, two scriptures came into my mind. [Moroni 8:16 and 1 John 4:18] Both said the same thing: 'Perfect love casteth out all fear.' ...

"I prayed with all the energy of my heart, 'Father, fill my soul with love.' ... [Then] [i]t all happened in a split second. ... [I]t was as if ... a warm feeling poured down into my soul—down my head, my neck, my chest. As it was pouring down, it drove out all of the fear. My shivering knees stopped shaking. I stood there, a big smile came to my face—a smile of deep, satisfying joy and confidence.

"... I had great confidence, but I [still] did not know what to do with it. As I stood there, it was as though someone came and put his arm around me and said, 'Let me do this for you. I can take it from here.' ... Then I watched myself do something very ... surprising. ... I went to that young man who was sitting on a chair shaking uncontrollably. I knelt in front of him and put my arms around him, pulling him gently to my chest. I told him, with all the strength of my soul, 'I love you, my brother.'

"In the very moment I did that," Elder Busche reported, "the evil spirit left. The missionary came to his senses, looked at me and said, 'I love you, too.'"²⁷

Most of us will not have to cast out evil spirits in such a direct manner. And I am not suggesting that this is the proper priesthood way to do it. But into each of our lives will come moments when we panic, when we won't know what to do with a situation involving other people. When, for example, we fear for the fate of our loved ones and we don't know what to do because everything we have tried has been to no avail. In those moments, if we can think about ways we can express love to them, we will find that perfect love is so powerful that it can, as the scriptures promise and as Elder Busche discovered, cast out all fear and give us hope and confidence even in the most unusual and most trying circumstances.

Even with this assurance, we still might ask, is it really possible that we can love someone as much as God does? I testify that we can. We may not be able to do that in this life, but we can come closer than we may think. I say that not because I have come close, but because others have. Let me share one concluding example.

Jonathon Napela was one of the first native Hawaiians to join the Church in this dispensation. Through a vision that came to him in a dream, he was prepared to receive Elder George Q. Cannon, one of the original missionaries to Hawaii. As a result, shortly after he heard the gospel, Jonathon was baptized. Jonathon soon became a leader in the Church in Hawaii. He was a man of great faith and priesthood power. On one occasion a woman who was unable to walk wished to be baptized. Elder Cannon recorded in his journal that Brother Napela and others "laid their hands upon her and commanded her in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to arise and walk. She immediately stood up and walked, and went and was baptized."²⁸ On another occasion, when the missionaries were travelling between islands a storm arose with such force that they were unable to progress despite their strenuous efforts with the oars. When despair began to set in, Elder Cannon asked Brother Napela to pray, and as recorded in the journal of another missionary, Jonathon "stood up in the bow, and in his native tongue ... asked the Lord to have mercy upon His servants ... and send the wind quickly or they might die. I knew the [favorable] wind would come," the missionary wrote "and it did, in less time than I take to write it, and we soon gladly landed in [our destination]."²⁹ Clearly this was a man who loved the Lord and whom the Lord loved and honored. And clearly that love emanated from Brother Napela to others whom he blessed.

When Jonathon was 60 years old, his beloved wife, Kitti, contracted leprosy. As Elder Yoshihiko Kikuchi described it, "at that time, there was no cure for this dreadful disease. In order to prevent the spreading of this disease, once you contracted it you were forced to live on one of the seashores in the leper colony [in Kalaupapa]. The lepers were taken there by boat. The sailors were so afraid of this disease that they [sometimes] pushed the patients into the sea, forcing them to swim to shore."³⁰ Given his love for his wife, surely Brother Napela must have sought to invoke the same priesthood power that had worked so well for others to heal his wife, but apparently to no avail. And so she was sent to the leper colony in Kalaupapa.

Protocol, common sense, and the medical knowledge of the time all required that Brother Napela leave his wife so that he would not also become infected. And yet, because of the love he had felt from the Lord and which now he felt for his wife, Jonathon could not abide the thought of leaving her. He therefore pleaded with the Minister of the Board of Health to be allowed to remain with her. He wrote, "I humbly petition the Board ... to permit me to stay here with my

wife for the following reasons: On August 3, 1843 I took my wife as my legally married wife and on that same day I vowed before God to care for my wife in health and sickness. ... I am 60 years old and do not have much longer to live. During the brief time remaining, I want to be with my wife.” His request was granted. Soon thereafter, he too contracted leprosy. He died several years later, shortly before his beloved Kittie passed away.³¹

One visitor to the colony described Jonathon’s physical condition a year before his death. “I should hardly have recognized him,” the visitor wrote, “he is so changed since I saw him last ... his face is swollen—many of his teeth gone—his hands broken out with the disease.”³² And yet another visitor who was there not too long before that time described the situation by focusing on things more important than Jonathon’s physical condition “[W]e found brother Napela ... taking care of his wife ... he is full of faith, and is still that good-natured, honorable soul.”³³

I testify that we can love as God loves. Not because we are so great or because we are so loving, but because God is. His love for us is perfect. It “suffereth long,” it “endureth all things,” and it “never faileth.”³⁴ It can transform us and enhance our love for others. May we “be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ... when he shall appear we shall be like him,”³⁵ is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ 1 Nephi 11:17.

² Luke 15:20.

³ Matthew 18:12; Luke 15:4.

⁴ Luke 15:5.

⁵ Matthew 23:37; 3 Nephi 10:4-6. The constancy of God’s love for us is shown by the Savior’s more extensive lament for the inhabitants of the New World. In 3 Nephi 10, Christ notes “how oft *have I* gathered you,” (verse 4), “how oft *would I have* gathered you,” (verse 5) and “how oft *will I* gather you” (italics added). The different tenses convey the unrelenting nature of Christ’s desire to have us experience his love for us.

⁶ Neil L. Andersen, “Repent ... That I May Heal You,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2009.

⁷ See Mormon 6:17.

⁸ See Alma 19:36.

⁹ See 2 Kings 17:36; Psalm 136:12.

¹⁰ See 2 Nephi 1:15.

¹¹ See Alma 5:33.

¹² See Alma 34:16.

¹³ See Doctrine and Covenants 6:20

¹⁴ 2 Nephi 28:32

¹⁵ 1 John 4:8, 16

¹⁶ Romans 8:38, 39

¹⁷ John 13:34. See also John 15:12. Because both have perfect love for us, references to Christ’s love apply equally to the love of His Father for us. See John 15:9 (“As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you ...”).

¹⁸ 1 Nephi 3:7.

¹⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Harper/San Francisco 2001), 40.

²⁰ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 32.

²¹ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 31.

²² Gordon B. Hinckley, “In the Arms of His Love,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2006

²³ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 41.

²⁴ Henry B. Eyring, “Come Unto Me,” *Ensign*, May 2013

²⁵ Moroni 7:47.

²⁶ Elder Max Caldwell suggested that “[t]he phrase ‘love of Christ’ might have meaning in three directions: 1. Love for Christ; 2. Love from Christ; 3. Love like Christ.” C. Max Caldwell, “Love of Christ,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1992.

²⁷ F. Enzo Busche, *Yearning for the Living God*, (Deseret Book, 2004), 268–272.

²⁸ Joseph H. Spurrier, “Jonathon Napela: Quiet Hero of Hawaii,” *Ensign*, August 1978 (quoting George Q. Cannon).

²⁹ Fred E. Woods, “Jonathan Napela: A Noble Hawaiian Convert,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: The Pacific Isles*, ed. Reid L. Nielsen, Stephen C. Harper, Craig K. Manscill, and Mary Jane Woodger (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 23–36, <http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/regional-studies-latter-day-saint-history-pacific-isles/2-jonathan-napela-noble-hawaiian-co>. <http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/regional-studies-latter-day-saint-history-pacific-isles/2-jonathan-napela-noble-hawaiian-co>.

³⁰ Yoshihiko Kikuchi, “Daughter of God,” *Ensign*, May 1988.

³¹ Woods, “Jonathan Napela” text at fn. 52.

³² Woods, “Jonathan Napela” text at fn. 51.

³³ Woods, “Jonathan Napela” text at fn. 49.

³⁴ Moroni 7:45–46.

³⁵ Moroni 7:48.