

# “MAY CHRIST LIFT THEE UP”

Brad Wilcox

**F**OR TOO MANY, the message of Easter falls on deaf ears. Elder Gerald N. Lund said, “How tragic that God so loved the world that He gave His Only Begotten Son, and the world is so blind and apathetic that it does not care. It turns away from the gift as if it were of no consequence whatever.”<sup>1</sup> Such apathy and open rebellion breaks my heart. However, of equal concern to me is that for too many faithful disciples in the Church, the message of Easter does not fall on deaf ears but on discouraged ones. Many Saints feel defeated, as if they can never do enough and are forever falling short.

---

*Brad Wilcox is a professor of education at Brigham Young University and a member of the Sunday School General Board. He presided over the Chile Santiago East Mission from 2003 to 2006.*

The message of Easter is that Christ did not come to put us down but to lift us up.

At the end of the Book of Mormon, Moroni included a final epistle from his father in which Mormon pleads that despite all the trials and challenges that surrounded him, Moroni would be uplifted: “May not the things which I have written grieve thee, to weigh thee down unto death; but may Christ lift thee up, and may his sufferings and death, and the showing his body unto our fathers, and his mercy and long-suffering, and the hope of his glory and of eternal life, rest in your mind forever. And may the grace of God the Father . . . and our Lord Jesus Christ . . . abide with you forever” (Moroni 9:25–26).

Mormon’s message is for all of us when we are surrounded by trials, when we feel overwhelmed and beaten, when expectations seem too high and heaven seems too far out of reach. At such times Mormon’s words to his son must also ring in our ears: “May Christ lift thee up.”

### THREE SNAPSHOTS

Consider three examples of discouraged members. Their circumstances vary, but their problems are similar.

*Discouraged missionary.* A zone of missionaries gathered for a conference. The elders and sisters looked forward to seeing each other and receiving instruction from their mission president. As they arrived, they

exchanged news of what was going on in their various sectors. "You'll never believe it!" said one of the elders. "We found the greatest family ever!" He and his companion proceeded to tell about how they had been led to a golden family who welcomed them into their home and even came to Sunday meetings.

Another missionary piped up. "A sister in our ward asked us to teach her nephew. He is reading the Book of Mormon, and last night he accepted a baptism date."

Everyone was excited—well, almost everyone. One elder pulled at his junior companion's sleeve and stepped away from the group. "Let's go get a seat," he muttered. They entered the empty chapel where the meeting was to be held and sat down. "Why aren't we getting blessed like that?" the senior asked his companion. "Where's a golden family for us and an investigator with a baptism date? What are we doing wrong?"

The junior replied, "Elder, we're not doing anything wrong. We're obeying the rules."

"Well, we must be missing something! We are just going to have to start working harder to be worthy for the Lord's blessings."

"We *are* working hard!" said the junior. "We *are* worthy and the Lord *is* blessing us."

"But obviously that's not enough. Starting tomorrow we are going to get up earlier and go to bed later, work extra hours, and start a fast."

*Busy mother.* Mom gave quick hugs as she hustled her three school-aged children out the door. She was grateful it was her neighbor's turn to drive so she didn't have to be dressed yet. She turned back toward the kitchen just in time to see her preschool son reach for the orange juice and tip the carton right off the counter. She ran, but not quickly enough to catch it before it hit and sprayed juice across the kitchen floor. She yelled, "What were you thinking?" Her toddler began to cry.

What a morning! Had they read scriptures? No. She had to find her oldest son's homework. Had they had prayer? Yes, but whatever spirit that brought was now driven off by her losing her temper.

Later she berated herself in an email she wrote to a friend: "I must get up earlier so I am dressed. I need to make sure we get our scriptures in. I should keep my temper and not yell. There are just so many *must dos* and *should dos* in my life that I'm having a hard time keeping up. I know the Lord will help me if I do my part, but I can't even do that."

*Perfectionist president.* The Relief Society president was late for presidency meeting. It rarely happened. She was usually early, but it had been an especially trying day with six food orders to fill. The meeting opened with prayer, and the sisters turned to calendaring. As they previewed upcoming meetings, the president began to make a list of things that needed to be done in preparation. Her personality was such that she couldn't do anything halfway or delegate easily to others. The bishop called her a "200 percenter" with good reason.

Her counselor cautioned, "You are taking too much on yourself. You need to make some assignments."

She replied, "By the time I explain to one of the sisters what needs to be done and then call and remind her and then check to make sure it got done, it's just easier to simply do it myself."

"But you'll be exhausted," her counselor warned.

"I'm already exhausted," the president replied.

"Then at least do the bare minimum."

"I can't just do the bare minimum when I know I can do more," she responded. "The Lord expects my best. How can I ask for God's help if I don't give my all?"

Are the missionary, mother, and president trying to earn blessings? Are they trying to earn grace or salvation? If you asked them, they would probably say no. They are just trying to do their part—to do their best. But will their best ever be good enough? Where does such thinking stop? When things go wrong, surely they will convince themselves it is their fault for not going one more extra mile or performing one more act of service. Surely they will berate themselves for not having offered one more prayer or read one more verse of scripture. Many faithful Saints like these three rarely feel they are measuring up, and they are wearing themselves out trying.

The extreme to which this perspective can be taken became obvious in an interview I conducted with a recently returned missionary at BYU. He was anxiously engaged in many good causes, including

school, work, and ward callings. He was even obediently trying to make time for dating. The list of tasks he needed to do in a day to remain even semi-guilt-free kept growing longer. I warned, “You are taking too much on yourself. You are not turning to the Lord.”

He said, “Great! Now there’s one more thing I have to do—turn to the Lord!”

Turning to the Lord is not one more thing to do. It is the only thing to do.<sup>2</sup> Christ is the vine. We are the branches. He has said, “For without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5). In Psalm 28 we read, “The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped. . . . [I am] lift[ed] . . . up forever” (vv. 7, 9). That message sounds similar to Mormon’s words, “May Christ lift thee up” (Moroni 9:25). In each of the snapshots presented and in all our lives, the solution is turning to the Lord and letting him lift us up by understanding his grace, experiencing his transforming power, and finding the hope that he alone offers.

### UNDERSTAND GRACE

In many of our busy latter-day lives, what is needed is not one more sacrifice from us but rather a deeper understanding of the sacrifice of the Savior for us and the grace he offers. The LDS Bible Dictionary tells us grace is a “divine means of help or strength, given through the bounteous mercy and love of Jesus Christ” and is “made possible by his atoning sacrifice” (Bible Dictionary, “Grace,” 697).

As surely as we need grace at life's finish line, we also need it to get to the finish line. Robert L. Millet wrote, "The grace of God is extended to you and me every hour of every day and is not limited to the bar of judgment."<sup>3</sup> Grace is the reason we can say, "[We] can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth [us]" (Philippians 4:13).

Most of us recognize our total dependence on the Lord for our salvation in the hereafter, but we may overlook our dependence on him here and now. We recognize the role of grace when Alma the Younger taught of divine forgiveness (Alma 36:18) but may overlook it when he told those in Gideon that Christ would "take upon him their infirmities, that . . . he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people" (Alma 7:12). We recognize the role of grace when Alma the Elder taught of resurrection and redemption (Mosiah 18:2) but may overlook it when he shared the answer to prayer in which the Lord said, "I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs, even while you are in bondage; and this will I do 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" (Mosiah 24:14).

We read in *True to the Faith*, "In addition to needing grace for your ultimate salvation, you need this enabling power every day of your life. As you draw near to your Heavenly Father in diligence, humility, and meekness, He will uplift and strengthen you through

His grace. . . . Reliance upon His grace enables you to progress and grow in righteousness.”<sup>4</sup>

In 2 Nephi we are reminded to rely “wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (2 Nephi 31:19). Without Christ we cannot be resurrected or forgiven. However, the ultimate goal is not just to live after we die and to be clean. Immortality and sinlessness are only two of many godlike attributes we must acquire. The ultimate goal is not just coming to Christ but becoming like him.

“The miracle of change, the miracle associated with the renovation and regeneration of fallen man, is the work of a God. . . . The transformations from a fallen nature to a spiritual nature, from worldliness to holiness, from corruption to incorruption, and from imperfection to perfection are accomplished because divine powers bring them to pass. They are acts of grace.”<sup>5</sup>

We must not see Christ’s grace as supplementing our works or our works as supplementing Christ’s grace as if we need to meet some sort of minimum height requirement to enter heaven. It is not about height; it is about growth. “Too often . . . Latter-day Saints think that men and women are expected to do their 85 or 90 percent and leave the remainder, a small percentage, for Jesus to handle.”<sup>6</sup> However, Elder M. Russell Ballard reminded us, “No matter how hard we work, no matter how much we obey, no matter how many good things we do in this life, it would not be enough were it not for Jesus Christ and His loving grace.”<sup>7</sup>



We do not reach heaven by supplementing. We reach heaven by covenanting, and a covenant is not a cold contract between party A and party B, each doing his respective part. It is a warm relationship between two friends who are literally on a first-name basis, each loving and working with the other.<sup>8</sup> We make covenants at baptism, and hands are extended to bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost to help us. We make covenants in the temple, and a hand is extended to teach us of Christ's willingness to strengthen and help us. President Cecil O. Samuelson said, "It is that outreached hand that we call grace."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps one of the reasons members of the Church avoid speaking about grace is because many Christian churches teach about the topic without a full knowledge of the plan of salvation. Robert L. Millet has said, "One of the scandals of the Christian world . . . is a seeming disregard for the simple statement of the Master: 'If ye love me, keep my commandments' (John 14:15). . . . Easy believism and cheap grace have replaced the depth of discipleship demanded by Deity."<sup>10</sup> Some Christians are so happy about what Christ has saved us *from* that they have not thought enough about what he has saved us *for*. They are so happy that our debt is paid that they may not have considered why the debt existed in the first place. As my friend Omar Canals puts it, many Christians see the Atonement as nothing more than a huge favor Christ did for us. Latter-day Saints see it also as a huge investment he made in us because he is transforming us.



The child's practice is not only a concrete way of showing gratitude for Mom's loving sacrifice but also the way he is transformed.

(Cody Bell, *Boy Playing the Piano*, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)

## BE TRANSFORMED

Christ's purpose is not just to save us but also to shape us. We lived in a premortal world with our Father in Heaven, but we were not like him physically or spiritually. Because we wanted to be like him, a plan was presented that included each of us passing through a mortal experience. God knew that an unavoidable part of that experience would be mistakes and sins, so he prepared a Savior for us. Without mortality, our progress would have been blocked forever, but without the Atonement the poor choices that are part of mortality would also have blocked our progress. The Atonement allows us to be educated by mortality rather than condemned by it.<sup>11</sup>

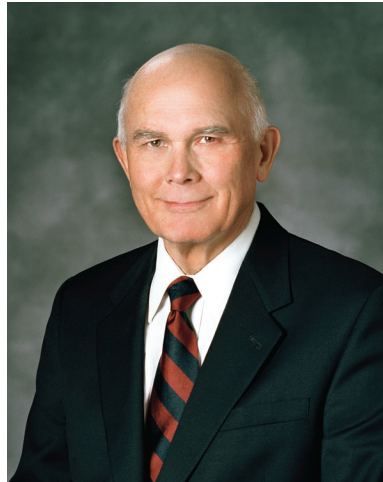
Justice demands immediate perfection or punishment when we fall short. Jesus took our punishment. Jesus paid our debt to justice, and he paid that debt in full. He didn't pay it all except for a few coins. Because he paid that debt, he can now turn to us with a new arrangement. He can ask for eventual perfection and offer to strengthen, mentor, and tutor us through the developmental process, however long it takes. To that end he asks us to show faith in him, repent, make and keep covenants, seek the Holy Ghost, and endure to the end. He said, "Follow me" (Matthew 4:19) and "Keep my commandments" (John 14:15). By complying, we are not paying the demands of justice—not even the smallest part. Instead, we are showing appreciation for what Jesus Christ did by using the Atonement to improve ourselves and live a life like his.

Over the last few years, I have shared the following analogy, which has proven helpful for some: Christ's arrangement with us is similar to a mom providing music lessons for her child. Mom, who pays the piano teacher, can require her child to practice. By so doing, she is not attempting to recover the cost of the lessons, but to help the child take full advantage of this opportunity to live on a higher level. Her joy is found not in getting her investment back but in seeing it used. The child's practice is not only a concrete way of showing gratitude for Mom's loving sacrifice but also the way he is transformed.

If the child, in his immaturity, sees Mom's expectation to practice as unnecessary or overly burdensome, it is because he doesn't yet

share her perspective. When Christ's expectations feel trying to us, perhaps it is because we do not yet see through his eyes. We do not yet understand what he is trying to make of us. A God who requires nothing of us is making nothing of us, and our Heavenly Father does not work this way.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks has said, "The repenting sinner must suffer for his sins, but this suffering has a different purpose than punishment or payment. Its purpose is *change*."<sup>12</sup> Let's put that in terms of the music lessons: the child must practice the piano, but this practice has a different purpose than punishment or payment. Its purpose is change.



Elder Dallin H. Oaks  
(© Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)

Occasionally I have seen a man walking near BYU campus carrying a large cross bearing the words "Saved by Grace." He seems to think Latter-day Saints are missing that message. On the contrary, we acknowledge and agree that we are saved by grace, but we also recognize that salvation is only part of the message of Christ's cross. Christ came to save us by bridging the abyss between humans and the divine, but then what? Is the whole goal to make peace with God and be close to him? No.

Latter-day Saints know there is much more ahead. We believe in life after death, but we also believe in life after salvation. Christ came to save us and to transform us. This knowledge can offer us great hope.

#### FIND HOPE

Hope brings perspective when we consider the past and new motivation as we look toward the future. One young man, Reed Rasband, wrote the following in my mission preparation class: "I knew the Atonement brought comfort and forgiveness because I had experienced those blessings, but I failed to see how the blessings of the Atonement were continually pouring over me. In the past I used the Atonement only when my life got hard or when I made a mistake. My use of the Atonement was limited because I did not realize Christ's power to help me was constantly there—even when I did not think I needed help. One of the pieces of the puzzle I was missing was grace. Grace to me was a vague, diffuse source of divine help that I had difficulty channeling."

Reed went on to explain that he had previously believed that grace—divine assistance and enabling power—must be earned by works, even if the works were minimal. He wrote: "This paradigm was easy to understand. Jesus had his part and so did I. I worked hard to fulfill my share, trying to live as righteously as I could to be worthy of His grace. I knew I only had to do my small part, but deep inside I wondered how I would ever know when my part

was completed. I realize now the problem with this outlook was not striving for improvement; it was that I did not fully recognize Jesus as being the improver.”

Without this understanding Reed became frustrated because he felt that any steps toward self-betterment were all his responsibility. Even if he improved one aspect of his life, he would still see many others where he was not up to par. Then he would work really hard at one of those and find that he had slipped backward on the first. Reed knew he could lay his burdens at Jesus’ feet, but he was determined to have them all clean, wrapped up nicely, and even tied with a bow so they would be acceptable.

A turning point came for Reed when he considered Christ’s perfect attributes. Reed wrote: “Only as I began to understand Christ’s perfect love could I begin to understand His grace and Atonement. Jesus does not just love me when I am sinning or hurting. He loves me all the time and is willing to help me all the time. He wants me to become like Him.” Reed realized divine help was not just available when he was at the end of his rope—it *was* his rope. Reed didn’t need to earn Christ’s help. He didn’t need to deserve it. Reed insightfully wrote, “Grace is no more earned than Christ’s love is deserved.”

Reed felt hope when he realized that works are important not because they are a requirement for receiving grace but because they develop from it. They are how we channel, use, and show appreciation

for the priceless gift. Grace is not the absence of God's high expectations but the presence of God's power.

Like Reed, I have felt great hope as I realize that in this school of mortality we are not alone. We have divine help with our homework. One of my favorite names for Jesus is *Emmanuel*. We are told its meaning in scripture: "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Is there a better definition of grace than this? Much is required of us in this perfecting process, but God and Christ are *with us* throughout the entire transforming journey.

#### FEEL UPLIFTED

The message of Easter is Christ's Atonement. Because of it, we can live again after we die, and we can be forgiven of our sins. But the message of Easter does not stop there. Because of the Atonement, we can be consoled in our sorrows and afflictions. But the message of Easter doesn't stop there either. Because of the Atonement, we can ultimately become like Jesus. This idea gives great meaning to Mormon's words, "May Christ lift thee up" (Moroni 9:25). The word *lift* means to elevate or raise to a higher mood or position, but it also means to raise in rank or condition. Christ lifts our condition as we turn to him by understanding his grace, experiencing his transformation, and finding the hope that he alone can give.

To the discouraged missionary we say, "Take heart! Christ will lift you up." Blessings are not just awaiting extra-milers. Blessings are

enabling each mile and extra mile. Grace is not a prize for the worthy but power to become worthy. To the busy mom we say, “Don’t quit! Christ will lift you up.” Let’s not get so focused on checking items off our to-do list that we forget why God gave us the list in the first place. We are not called human doings. We are called human beings. God knows that becoming takes time and that some days are better than others. To the “200 percent” Relief Society president we say, “Thanks for your sincere efforts! But remember you are working not just *for* God but *with* him. Christ will lift you up.” God uses people to finish his work, but he also uses his work to finish people. Because he knows we can’t give our all—not all the time—he is willing to accept any sincere effort. We don’t have to be perfect right now. We just have to be willing to be perfected.

Christ did not come to put us down but to lift us up. This is the message of Easter that is needed by a deaf world and also by discouraged Saints. When we feel we can’t do enough, we can remember he did more than enough (Ether 12:26; Moroni 10:32). When we become painfully aware of our weakness, we can marvel at his strength (see Psalm 136:12). When we feel we have fallen from grace, we can realize it is actually grace that lifts us up. Mormon’s words to Moroni are also written to us: “May Christ lift thee up. . . . And may the grace of God the Father . . . and our Lord Jesus Christ . . . abide with you forever” (Moroni 9:25–26).



NOTES

1. Gerald N. Lund, "What the Atoning Sacrifice Meant for Jesus," in *My Redeemer Lives*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 46.
2. See Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 65–69.
3. Robert L. Millet, "What We Worship," in *My Redeemer Lives*, 85.
4. *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 78.
5. Robert L. Millet, *By Grace We Are Saved* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 19, 86.
6. Millet, "What We Worship," 84.
7. M. Russell Ballard, "Building Bridges of Understanding," *Ensign*, June 1998, 65.
8. Truman G. Madsen, *The Temple: Where Heaven Meets Earth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 69.
9. Cecil O. Samuelson, "Be Ye Therefore Perfect" (devotional address, September 6, 2011, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT).
10. Millet, "What We Worship," 86–87.
11. See Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, *The Belonging Heart* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 77.
12. Dallin H. Oaks, *The Lord's Way* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 223; emphasis in original.

