



"Christ in the Land Bountiful," Simon Dewey, © IRI

The most important way we can access God's divine love is to ask for it. The most important way we can experience God's divine love is to love others.

# Feeling God's Love

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*"Where Love Is, There God Is Also"*

—Leo Tolstoy

Some of my family and friends have separated themselves from the gospel. Their reasons vary. However, they often share a common concern: if God loves all his children, all the time, everywhere, and no matter what—why can't I feel it? In response to this question, I wrote this essay. In doing so, I found President Russell M. Nelson's conference talk on divine love to be an important resource. President Nelson states that "while divine love can be called perfect, infinite, enduring, and universal, it cannot correctly be characterized as *unconditional*."<sup>1</sup> In grappling with the concept of conditional love and hoping to comfort loved ones who struggle to feel God's love, I suggest here that the reason we cannot feel God's love is not because he loves us less but because we cannot access it.

The focus of what follows describes the nature of God's love and how we can feel it more. I begin by distinguishing between God's love—which is perfect, infinite, enduring, and universal—and how we experience his

love—which is conditional. Then I point out that we sometimes mistakenly associate the evidence of God’s love with our material conditions and experiences when the evidence that God loves us all—everywhere, all the time, no matter what—is the Atonement of Jesus Christ. This essay also addresses how obedience and repentance can increase our access to God’s love, how to feel God’s love even and especially during hard times, the price we must pay to experience divine love, and the single requirement for feeling God’s love—loving others.

### Defining Divine Love

What is divine love, and what distinguishes it from other kinds of love (namely, parental love, friendship, or romantic love)?<sup>2</sup> *Sympathy*,<sup>3</sup> *empathy*,<sup>4</sup> and *compassion*<sup>5</sup> are all Topical Guide synonyms for *love*. Combined, they define our love for others as the state or condition of having internalized their well-being. This definition of *love* implies that there are as many kinds of love as there are loving relationships. Adam Smith wrote, “Every man feels his own pleasures and his own pains more sensibly than those of other people. . . . After himself, the members of his own family, those who usually live in the same house with him, his parents, his children, his brothers and sisters, are naturally the objects of his warmest affection.”<sup>6</sup> Of the different kinds of love, divine love, the state or condition in which God has internalized our well-being, is the highest form of love because it is perfect, infinite, enduring, and universal.

The scriptures teach that to internalize another’s well-being requires that we somehow dwell in that person: “God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God and God in him” (1 John 4:16). One important consequence of love—of dwelling in each other—is that their success, happiness, and sufferings become our own.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, God’s divine love means that his work and glory is our progress toward achieving immortality and eternal life (see Moses 1:39).

### Examples of Dwelling in Each Other

Adam and Eve internalized each other’s well-being, leading Adam to exult, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. . . . Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:23–24). The Apostle Paul characterized the Saints in his day as dwelling in each other by comparing them to members of the same

body. As members of the same body, each member cared for the other so that “whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). The sons of Mosiah loved those beyond the borders of their families and members of their faith to include the Lamanites, their enemies: “They could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble” (Mosiah 28:3; see also Alma 26:33).

### Dimensions of Divine Love

There is a difference between God's ways and our ways—between God's divine love and our love. Jesus taught his twelve Apostles: “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another” (John 13:34). Loving others is certainly not a new commandment. However, loving others “as I have loved you” certainly is.<sup>8</sup> Keeping this new commandment requires us to distinguish between our love and divine love expressed and exemplified in the Savior Jesus Christ. Consider the four dimensions President Nelson used to describe God's love.<sup>9</sup>

Divine love is perfect. *Perfect* can be defined as free from fault or complete (see Matthew 5:48). Perfect love is pure and unstained by selfishness. Lehi reflected this quality of love when he declared, “I have none other object save it be the everlasting welfare of your souls” (2 Nephi 2:30). Perfect love is manifest in all our senses. It enlightens our mind and enables us to confound the wise (see Doctrine and Covenants 6:15; and 1 Corinthians 1:27). It is delicious (see Alma 32:28). It frees us from fear (see 1 John 4:18). It strengthens us beyond our natural abilities (see 1 Nephi 7:17–18).

Divine love is infinite. Infinite implies limitless or endless in space, extent, or size. God's infinite love was manifest by his infinite atoning sacrifice that, like his love, is infinite. As a result, there is no suffering, disappointment, separation, or pain that God cannot understand and heal (see Alma 7:11–12).

Divine love endures. The risen Lord taught, “For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed” (3 Nephi 22:10; quoting Isaiah 54:10).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, charity, or the pure love of Christ, “never faileth” (1 Corinthians 13:8). And while an earthly mother may forget her suckling child, the Lord promises, “yet will I not forget thee” (Isaiah 49:15).

Divine love is universal. Mormon recorded, “Now my brethren, we see that God is mindful of every people, whatsoever land they may be in; yea, he numbereth his people, and his bowels of mercy are over all the earth” (Alma 26:37).

Together, these descriptions of divine love paint a comforting picture of a Father in Heaven whose love for us transcends our circumstances and even our bad choices, a love that has power to reach out after us and save us—whether in life or in death.

### **Christ’s Atonement: The Expression of God’s Love**

The greatest example of love was the Atonement of Jesus Christ. “Greater love hath no man” than he who “lay[s] down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). His perfect, infinite, enduring, and universal love enabled him to dwell in each of us and vicariously suffer for our sins and mistakes and to rejoice with us when we draw near to him (see 3 Nephi 17:20). Indeed, his atoning sacrifice can be described as perfect and pure,<sup>11</sup> infinite,<sup>12</sup> enduring (see Isaiah 49:15), and universal.<sup>13</sup> Our response to his perfect, infinite, enduring, and universal sacrifice should be, “I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me.”<sup>14</sup>

Some separate themselves from God’s love because they see the uneven distribution of life’s privileges that appear unrelated to individual choices and blame God for the inequities. From their observations, they conclude that either God has favorites or God doesn’t exist. Either conclusion is false and distances us from his love. One’s share of wealth, power, education, and freedom do not measure God’s love. Otherwise, we would conclude that the wealthy are more righteous, the powerful are God’s chosen, and the educated and free are God’s beloved. The scriptures teach otherwise.

Mary taught that the Lord “hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away” (Luke 1:51–53).

The world is a very unfair place without the Atonement. But in the Atonement, we find the one sure egalitarian measure of God’s love. He suffered and offered salvation for each of us—all of us—equally. Nephi taught: “Behold, hath the Lord commanded any that they should not partake of his goodness? Behold I say unto you, Nay; but all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden. . . . He inviteth them all to come unto



him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile" (2 Nephi 26:28, 33). Truly, God is no respecter of persons.

### **Experiencing Divine Love through Obedience and Repentance**

Some of what we experience is related to our choices. President Nelson taught, "The full flower of divine love and our greatest blessings from that love are conditional—predicated upon our obedience to eternal law."<sup>15</sup> Nephi likewise explained: "Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; [but] he that is righteous is favored of God" (1 Nephi 17:35).

Those conditions that increase our capacity to experience God's love (namely, faith, repentance, baptism, and enduring obedience to his commandments) are themselves an indication of his love. Because he wants us to be like him, he allows us room to incrementally come into a fullness of his love as we try, fail, and try again. Sometimes we make poor choices and experience unhappy consequences. Yet experiencing the difficult consequences of our poor choices are evidence of God's love because they are designed to divert us away from the path of destruction and to protect the innocent. For God "doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him" (2 Nephi 26:24). Those who choose to keep God's commandments and continue in God receive "more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter" (Doctrine and Covenants 50:24) until they are "glorified in truth" and know "all things" (93:28).

These scriptures teach us that the "blessings" that come from obedience have little to do with worldly wealth, power, or opportunity and more to do with our access to God dwelling within us. Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught that these blessing are accessed through obedience to divine law: "The love of God does not supersede His laws and His commandments, and the effect of God's laws and commandments does not diminish the purpose and effect of His love."<sup>16</sup>

The parable of the prodigal son emphasizes the connection between God's love, our choices, and what we experience. The prodigal son's father loved him, even when he withdrew from his presence and squandered his inheritance. Yet the father knew that exercising agency was required to becoming righteous. So, he let him choose. But the father continued to love his son even

when he made bad choices. And when his son repented and returned, the father rushed to meet him and called for a celebration to welcome him home (see Luke 15:11–32).

Keeping God's commandments not only increases our access to God's love but demonstrates our own love for God and others. We begin by keeping God's first and second great commandments to love God and others (see Matthew 22:38–39). Then, as we dwell in others and God in us, we naturally keep God's other commandments because that is how we bless others. We don't lie, steal, envy, murder, violate the law of chastity, or commit similar acts because we want to bless rather than burden our neighbors—because their well-being has become our own (see Exodus 20:1–17). Emphasizing that keeping the two great commandments leads naturally to keeping God's other commandments, Jesus taught, “On these two commandments [to love God and others] hang all the laws and the prophets” (Matthew 22:40).

### Experiencing God's Love in Adversity

Sometimes, we may separate ourselves from God because we associate our hard times with the absence of his love. This is, again, a false conclusion. Not all of what we experience follows from our choices. Jesus taught that God “maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). King Benjamin taught that God “has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another” (Mosiah 2:21). And independent of our choices, the Resurrection is made available to all (see John 5:28–29).

Sometimes what we experience is simply the result of living in a fallen world where the agency of imperfect and evil people causes the righteous to suffer for a season—only to be later exalted on high (see Alma 14:11). Regardless of the circumstances of our lives, we can be assured that God has internalized our well-being and is dwelling within us if we are willing, including in our loneliest and darkest moments. A familiar hymn confirms the connections between hard times and divine love:

*When through the deep waters I call thee to go,  
The rivers of sorrow shall not o'erflow;  
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless, . . .  
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.<sup>17</sup>*

We cannot always or even often understand why our lives' paths lead through deep waters. However, because God's love is perfect, infinite, enduring, and universal, we can trust that he will be with us and sanctify to us our deepest distress—even when what we are experiencing seems lacking in love. Elder James B. Martino summarized: "Our Heavenly Father, who loves us completely and perfectly, permits us to have experiences that will allow us to develop the traits and attributes we need to become more and more Christlike. Our trials come in many forms, but each will allow us to become more like the Savior as we learn to recognize the good that comes from each experience."<sup>18</sup>

### Experiencing God's Love by Loving Others

The most important way we can access God's divine love is to ask for it. The most important way we can experience God's divine love is to love others. Divine love for others is a *gift* that we can ask God to bestow upon us. Mormon taught, "Pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ" (Moroni 7:48). Being filled with the love of God for others shines the same love into our lives. Then, the more we love others, the more of God's divine love we enjoy in our own lives (see Matthew 16:25). Sometimes when we feel a lack of closeness with God, we can interpret it as an invitation to reach out in love to others. In so doing, we will enjoy God's love in our lives in richer abundance than ever before. But how, knowing the transcendent quality of divine love, can we ever love others the way he loves us? How can we keep the new commandment to love others as God loves us?

Since divine love is a gift from God, and God is love, we can only receive this gift by receiving the Savior and his Atonement. Because of our humanness, we cannot, on our own, possess divine love. Through the Atonement, we are enabled to develop this divine love. We ask for God's help with all the energy of our soul. Exercising our moral agency and accepting the Savior's will by itself neither saves nor exalts us, but it does open the door for the Savior to do so. As we ask for and receive God's divine love, our natures are changed. We grow in love as if from grace to grace. It is this change in our disposition that enables us to love others.<sup>19</sup> Joseph Smith described the change: "A man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world anxious to bless the whole human race."<sup>20</sup>



We can measure our capacity to love by comparing our love for others with the qualities of divine love. We may ask ourselves the following questions:

- What is the *quality* of our love for others? Can we love without asking, “What’s in it for me?”<sup>21</sup> In our hearts, do we desire deeply the well-being of others and feel joy when they succeed and sorrow when they fail or suffer? (see Mark 12:30; and Moroni 10:32).
- What is the *depth* of our love for others? Are we patient and kind even when it is inconvenient or unpopular to do so? Are we willing to serve and sacrifice when only God notices our efforts? (see Matthew 6:1).
- What is the *durability* of our love for others? Does our love for others falter in the face of their rudeness, demands on our resources, and character flaws? Do we forgive generously? Are we loyal friends even when circumstances and companions change? (see Matthew 5:44).
- What is the *breadth* of our love? Despite differences between ourselves and others, including circumstance, perspective, and choices, does our love bridge the gap? Can we include in our circle of friends even those who are different and who sometimes disappoint us (see 3 Nephi 12:44)? Do we love others more than we love winning?

Even though we will all find our love for others less than divine, we can reach out to the Savior to help us try to be better. Seeking his love can heal all wounds, including the ones between us. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf wrote: “Love is the healing balm that repairs rifts in personal and family relationships. It is the bond that unites families, communities, and nations. Love is the power that initiates friendship, tolerance, civility, and respect. It is the source that overcomes divisiveness and hate. Love is the fire that warms our lives with unparalleled joy and divine hope. Love should be our walk and our talk.”<sup>22</sup>

### Experiencing the Price of Divine Love

Sometimes we may not feel God’s love because we are unable or unwilling to pay the price—the price of internalizing the well-being of those around us. Under these circumstances, we need to resolve to pay the price of divine love. Part of that price is to sometimes suffer in place of, sometimes because of, and sometimes vicariously with those we love. Whether by experiencing the loss of a loved one or by experiencing the painful consequences of the choices

made by someone we love, our love for others often includes heartache and sacrifice.

Our natural tendency may be to go it alone: to think that we don't need God and his commandments or, similarly, that we don't need relationships with those around us that may bring us heartache and loss. But to be in relationships with both God and others, we must willingly pay the price of love (see Isaiah 35:10). As Sister Aileen H. Clyde explained, were we to refuse to pay the price love requires, "we would have to avoid what gives us life and hope and joy—our capacity to love deeply."<sup>23</sup> We willingly pay the price of love so we may experience joy. Of the Savior, Elder Bruce C. and Marie K. Hafen wrote that the Savior's "infinite capacity for joy is the inverse, mirror image of the depth of his capacity to bear our burdens."<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Love is what truly identifies us as disciples of Christ: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). The late Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin summarized the centrality of love in our lives when he taught: "Love is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the pathway of discipleship. It comforts, counsels, cures, and consoles. It leads us through valleys of darkness and through the veil of death. In the end, love leads us to the glory and grandeur of eternal life. . . . We are a people who love the Lord with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and we love our neighbors as ourselves. That is our signature as a people. It is like a beacon to the world, signaling whose disciples we are."<sup>25</sup>

I have sometimes felt alone and unloved even when my choices, I assumed, qualified me for something better. As Bonnie and I approached the end of our mission, I was diagnosed with cancer. I also learned that my retirement funds I had entrusted to the care of others was lost. And one of my family members whom I love deeply had been excommunicated. It all seemed like very deep water. Yet Bonnie and I held on and hoped for a brighter day. Now, years later, after seeing that many of the important things we lost have been restored, I find my testimony of God's divine love confirmed, and I can sing with conviction, "I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me."<sup>26</sup> **RE**

## Notes

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1. Russell M. Nelson, "Divine Love," *Ensign*, February 2003, 20.
2. See C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960).
3. A relationship or an affinity between people in which those things that affect one affects the other. See *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "sympathy."
4. The capacity to recognize and to some extent share feelings (such as sadness or happiness) that are being experienced by another. See Paul S. Bellet and Michael J. Maloney, "The Importance of Empathy as an Interviewing Skill in Medicine," *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* 226, no. 13 (1991): 1831–32.
5. "A feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering." Dictionary.com, s.v. "compassion."
6. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Philadelphia: Adam Finley, 1817), 354.
7. See Robert A. Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1961), 363.
8. I thank an anonymous reviewer of this essay for this insight—that the new commandment requires us to pattern our love for others after God's divine love.
9. Nelson, "Divine Love," 20.
10. Regarding this verse, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland wrote: "I love that. The hills and the mountains may disappear. The seas and oceans may dry up completely. The least likely things in the world may happen, but 'my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed.'" Jeffrey R. Holland, *Trusting Jesus* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 67.
11. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Purifying Power of Gethsemane," *Ensign*, May 1985, 9.
12. Tad R. Callister, "The Atonement of Jesus Christ," *Ensign*, May 2019, 85–87.
13. Merrill J. Bateman, "A Pattern for All," *Ensign*, November 2005, 74–76.
14. Charles H. Gabriel, "I Stand All Amazed," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 193.
15. Nelson, "Divine Love," 25.
16. Dallin H. Oaks, "Love and Law," *Ensign*, November 2009, 26.
17. Robert Keen, "How Firm a Foundation," *Hymns*, no. 85.
18. James B. Martino, "All Things Work Together for Good," *Ensign*, May 2010, 101.
19. Matthew O. Richardson, "'The Pure Love of Christ': The Divine Precept of Charity in Moroni 7," in *Living the Book of Mormon: Abiding by Its Precepts*, ed. Gaye Strathearn and Charles Swift (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 290–301.
20. "History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842]," 1115, The Joseph Smith Papers.
21. James E. Faust, "What's in It for Me?," *Ensign*, November 2002, 19–22.
22. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Love of God," *Ensign*, November 2009, 21.
23. Aileen H. Clyde, "'Charity Suffereth Long,'" *Ensign*, November 1991, 76.

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24. Bruce C. and Marie K. Hafen, *The Belonging Heart* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 315.
  25. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "The Great Commandment," *Ensign*, November 2007, 28–30.
  26. Charles H. Gabriel, "I Stand All Amazed," *Hymns*, no. 193.