

Introduction

And we are put on earth a little space, that we may learn to bear the beams of love.

—William Blake, “The Little Black Boy”

Among Latter-day Saints it is a given that mortality is “a time to prepare to meet God” (Alma 12:24). Surely it is this, but it is also, according to Lehi, “a compound in one” wherein both the misery of hell and the happiness of heaven are on offer (2 Nephi 2:11). Trying to find the balance here, one might suggest that mortality is a state wherein we lean one way or the other, drawing from the compound a preponderance of joy or anguish. This preponderance, however, is mostly anticipatory—a foretaste adapted to the narrowness of our present understanding. As Paul wrote: “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). And the same is true for those who choose not to love God:

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they lack the capacity to fully grasp what awaits them. We read the following description of hell in modern revelation: “The end thereof, neither the place thereof, nor their torment, no man knows; neither was it revealed, neither is, neither will be revealed unto man, except to them who are made partakers thereof; . . . wherefore, the end, the width, the height, the depth, and the misery thereof, they understand not, neither any man except those who are ordained unto this condemnation” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:45–48).

Like the man who glimpsed the beginning of infinity only to recoil from it, we cannot comprehend all that God has in store for his children. That man “sighed and stopped, shuddered and wept. His overladen heart uttered itself in tears; and he said ‘Angel, I will go no farther; for the spirit of man aches with this infinity.’”¹ The mercy of God is accordingly manifest in his command that we proceed gradually—“line upon line, precept upon precept”—and thereby *grow* into his overflowing goodness. And yet there is another aspect to God’s mercy that is easy to overlook, and that has to do with the earlier suggestion that the blessings of heaven are on offer in mortality. In the fourteenth century, Catherine of Siena, a Catholic patron saint and doctor of the Church, wrote, “All the way to heaven is heaven, for Jesus said, I am the Way.”²

This statement resonates with the restored gospel in several ways, chief of which is the idea that we *progressively* make our way back to God’s presence. But the surprising point of the statement is that devotion to Christ turns mortality into a heavenlike experience. This idea weaves its way through the scriptures, it seems to me, and in this little book I try to highlight some of the celestial silver linings of mortality. That is, I wish to propose that our experience

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here may be more heavenlike than we normally suppose. This, perhaps, is not a new idea; Latter-day Saints believe that much of the activity of the next world reenacts mortal experience, albeit at a higher turn of the spiral. In this book, however, I want to pick up the other end of the stick by suggesting that this world has a heavenlike structure and resonance that is often iterated out of sight through deep familiarity. This celestial resonance is (to borrow a line from T. S. Eliot) a “music heard so deeply that it is not heard at all.”³ But through attunement to gospel truths, we can begin to hear the music.

In chapter 6 of the Book of Moses we read:

Behold, all things have their likeness, and all things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath: all things bear record of me. (v. 63)

This venerable refrain reaches back to the Genesis narrative where God organized the various elements of creation in ways that lent meaning and understanding to human life: “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years” (Genesis 1:14). Conceivably, every aspect of nature “bears record” of the Creator in some way. It is easy, generally speaking, to see the hand of God in nature’s distant manifestations: “The [starry] heavens declare the glory of God,” wrote the Psalmist, “and the firmament sheweth his handywork” (Psalm 19:1). To the same effect, Brigham Young remarked that of all the sciences, astronomy “gives the greatest scope to the

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mind.”⁴ In terms of physical vastness, no science can match astronomy’s purview, but according to Moses, all things “on the earth” and “in the earth” and “under the earth” contribute to the celestial resonance that structures human experience. To be sure, that experience is subcelestial, but it borrows its significance from a higher sphere, much as the moon borrows light from the sun. Or so I will argue.

Consistent with Latter-day Saint thought, the idea of a heavenly way to heaven underscores the paramount significance of the here and now. We are not merely waiting for God to waft us away to a better place, but are actively working to improve our present circumstance. “Our business,” said Brigham Young, “is not merely to prepare to go to another planet. This is our home.”⁵ Further: “This is as good an earth as need be, if we will make it so. The Lord has redeemed it, and it is his wish that his Saints should beautify it and sanctify it and bring it back to the presence of the Father and Son yet more pure, more holy and more excellent than it was in its original state, with ourselves upon it.”⁶

What we do here redounds to us for good or evil, transfiguring our situation incrementally until that situation becomes our home. We grow into the heaven or hell we create on earth, and our judgment before the throne of God, according to scripture, is decided by our earthly judgment of others (see Matthew 7:1–2; Romans 2:1–5). Indeed, it seems that the commonly assumed lag time between action and consequence (whether exaltation or damnation) vanishes as our actions are reseen as the moment-to-moment judgments we visit on ourselves. John Taylor taught: “[The individual] tells the story himself, and bears witness against himself. . . . That record that is written by the man himself in the tablets of his own mind—that record that cannot lie—will in that day be unfolded before God and angels, and those

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who shall sit as judges.”⁷ Moreover, we come to *embody* the stories we act out: our thoughts and actions permeate and transform our being. Elder Bruce R. McConkie elaborates:

In a real though figurative sense, the book of life is the record of the acts of men as such record is written in their own bodies. It is the record engraven on the very bones, sinews, and flesh of the mortal body. That is, every thought, word and deed has an effect on the human body; all these leave their marks, marks which can be read by Him who is Eternal as easily as the words in a book can be read. By obedience to telestial law men obtain telestial bodies; terrestrial law leads to terrestrial bodies; and conformity to celestial law—because this law includes the sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost—results in the creation of a body which is clean, pure, and spotless, a celestial body. (D&C 88:16–32.) When the book of life is opened in the day of judgment (Rev. 20:12–15), men’s bodies will show what law they have lived. The Great Judge will then read the record of the book of their lives; the account of their obedience or disobedience will be written in their bodies.⁸

Alma understood that mortality is a high-stakes venture owing to the judgmental immediacy of our words, works, and thoughts (see Alma 12:14). These are the ways we decide and announce who we are, not just after the fact as we stand before God, but in the very moment we choose to obey or disobey. And if we have hardened into persons who will not repent, we have settled into a situation beyond which we cannot progress. Repentance is vital because it keeps us soft and pliant and therefore alive to the Holy Ghost, whose impressions gently reshape us into celestial beings. Without those impressions—without that outside help—we would all plateau at a subcelestial level.

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Not only that, but those impressions are “happifying,” to use a word long fallen out of Latter-day Saint circulation. They enable us to live “after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27), which is very different from “living happily ever after.” The latter refrain sums up the conventional view of happiness, which is one of Satan’s great half-truths: care-free placidity. The former rounds out the latter by allowing us to realize that life is a “compound in one” wherein care-free placidity is meaningful only as it is balanced against challenge and turmoil. And so—and this is part of the gospel miracle—happiness may reign amid placidity, turbulence, and even pain. But only as God’s unfathomable love begins to swell our hearts. In the words of a hymn familiar to Latter-day Saints:

I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me,
Confused at the grace that so fully he proffers me.
I tremble to know that for me he was crucified,
That for me, a sinner, he suffered, he bled and died.⁹

Happiness and pain can come together, particularly as we feel the depth of the Savior’s sacrificial love and through our own sufferings win fellowship with Christ. This is a thread that runs through the New Testament epistles: Christians do not suffer just to suffer, but in a world where pain is inevitable, they may tap into the power of the Atonement by assimilating their own hardships to those of Christ, who, after all, freely underwent far greater humiliations on our behalf. For his sake, wrote Paul, “I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, . . . that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the *fellowship of his sufferings*, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain

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unto the resurrection of the dead” (Philippians 3:8, 10–11; emphasis added).

For Paul, happiness sprang into existence with Christ’s victory over death, and if Christ had not achieved that victory, we would be “of all men most miserable” (1 Corinthians 15:19). Paul accordingly deemed it a small sacrifice—or perhaps no sacrifice at all—to “suffer the loss of all things” in order to become like Christ. He also learned that the glad message of the gospel makes one glad *in this life*. It is at once a promissory note of “the unsearchable riches” of God’s grace and a gift that enables one to experience the “peace of God, which passeth all understanding” in this world (Ephesians 3:8; Philippians 4:7). That peace, he wrote, caused him to rejoice; further, it afforded him spiritual and emotional equilibrium as he passed through the ups and downs of everyday life: “For I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need” (Philippians 4:11–12).

Obviously Paul is unusual in his devotion to Christ. He felt his personal failings keenly as he preached the gospel and consequently tried to rely wholly on Christ, believing that such reliance would make up the difference between his faltering presentation and the splendor of his message. Only in this way, he said, could God’s majesty be displayed—as it rested on the weak disciple of Christ and thereby allowed others to sense firsthand the rescuing power of a loving God (see 1 Corinthians 2:1–5). Though Paul may be unusual in his devotion to Christ—or at least unusual in the way he expresses that devotion—he falls squarely among prophets and apostles of every dispensation who have declared the gospel message. That message is happiness.

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because the benefits of living the gospel vastly outweigh the costs. Indeed, the costs may be said to be seed crystals of benefits yet unrealized, according to Brigham Young, because they gradually turn to our good and thereby fit us for the kingdom of heaven. After rehearsing the early tribulations of the Latter-day Saints, he stated: "Where, then, is the sacrifice this people have ever made? There is no such thing—they have only exchanged a worse condition for a better one, every time they have been moved—they have exchanged ignorance for knowledge, and inexperience for its opposite."¹⁰

It is easy, of course, to speak this way from the pulpit, particularly when one is not passing through a heavy trial. Better generally to extend sympathy to those who suffer than to pontificate from the podium—or one's writing desk—about the long-range benefits of hardship. But the gospel message runs deep, and its gladness does not attenuate as troubles mount. Indeed, that is when the saving power of the gospel manifests itself most richly. "Where danger is," wrote the great German lyric poet and philosopher Friedrich Hölderlin, "also grows the saving power."¹¹ We are saved amid extremity, and sometimes we have to be reminded by the hard knocks of life that our present situation is fleeting and tenuous. Those hard knocks pull us down into the oceanic depths of Christ's Atonement, for otherwise we are inclined to sail on its surface, taking our personal blessings for granted because "the breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of God's love have never really occurred to us (see Ephesians 3:18–19). In this state of mind we tend to associate happiness with the raft we are sailing on—and with the goods we have thereon amassed—and not with the vast ocean that makes the sailing experience possible in the first place. Not that this outlook is wrong, but it is, by my

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reading of the scriptures, limited. If the gospel is to make us *unconditionally* glad, there must be something absolutely universal to celebrate—a gift all people know, regardless of individual circumstances, talents, and possessions. This is, as Brigham Young said, the opportunity to be here and gain experience;¹² or, as Paul put it, to “live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). I think of it as being kept afloat by God’s love while learning to sail on our own.

Without that love we would be permanently grounded and absolutely miserable. We would be, in Lehi’s words, “devils, angels to a devil” (2 Nephi 9:9). So the glad message of the gospel is much more than just good news of the everyday variety. It subsists in the realization that mortal experience is not a given but a priceless gift. Whatever our setbacks and hardships, we can yet rejoice in the opportunity to be challenged and knocked about for some purpose beyond our mortal imagining. Recall James’s words: “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations [trials]; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (James 1:2–4). Going further, Sister Chieko N. Okazaki, while serving as first counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, wrote that gratitude should also be thrown into the mix: “When we thank God for our trials, tribulations, irritations, and afflictions, something happens to transform them into blessings.”¹³

When Sister Okazaki and James admonish us to find joy in hardship, they are measuring their happiness from the bottom up, just as Catherine of Siena, Paul, and Brigham Young did and as other followers of Christ choose to do. Yet the normal tendency is to measure happiness from the top down, noting the things we lack while overlooking the

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blessings we habitually enjoy and that from moment to moment prop us up. Such top-down reckoning engenders dissatisfaction, envy, self-loathing, and even anger. Upon grasping the wider vision the gospel offers, however, we realize that long before our “lack” came to control our thinking, we were blessed beyond measure by Christ’s willing sacrifice on our behalf. What we already have, and have as a free gift, is incomparably more than what we lack. Not only that, but the little we lack may be the means whereby we learn to love others, who also wrestle with their own lack.

My goal in writing this book is to try to see to the bottom of God’s love. I will, of course, fail in this endeavor because of my weakness and, more significantly, because there is no bottom. But there is value in the effort. We are accustomed to believe that God’s blessings begin with good health, financial stability, professional success, and so on. Starting the tally so late in the game, however, spawns frustration and dissatisfaction when these blessings go unrealized. And then when some are realized, we may feel that God has finally—after a season of sacrifice and want—opened the windows of heaven. To be sure, he has done just that, but, truth be told, his most significant blessings were in place long before we turned to him for help. Those blessings are the ones Catherine of Siena had in mind when she remarked that “all the way to heaven is heaven.” Our mere arrival here, when seen against the wide canvas of God’s plan of happiness, is cause for celebration. What is more, mortality, while not heaven, is a kind of “Easter in ordinary,”¹⁴ a fallen world resonant with heavenly love. That, too, is reason to rejoice.

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NOTES

1. John Paul Richter, "Dream Vision of the Infinite," cited in James E. Talmage, "The Earth and Man," <http://ndbf.blogspot.com/2006/08/>.
2. Quoted in Kelly S. Johnson, *The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 209.
3. T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," in *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1952), 136.
4. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 7:2.
5. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:297.
6. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:177.
7. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:79.
8. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 97.
9. "I Stand All Amazed," *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2002), no. 193.
10. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:314.
11. From the opening lines of his 1803 poem "Patmos," English translation at <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/patmos/>.
12. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:333.
13. Chieko N. Okazaki, *Lighten Up!* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 45.
14. I take this phrase from Nicholas Lash's fine book *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1988).