

Losing Self, Finding Peace

If we thought of life as a gift, we might not demand nearly as much from it. And if we lived more graciously, giving of ourselves more freely to the well-being of others, many of our personal concerns would disappear, and life would become easier for all.

—Lowell C. Bennion

The Apostle Paul taught that though we are all different, there is no room in the gospel for self-elevation. He reminds fellow Christians that while their bodies are composed of different parts, none are fully independent of the others. “So we, being many,” he continues, “are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (see Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12). The awkward *members* indicates that each person leans into all the others, and they into her, just as every body part leans into all the others to seamlessly constitute a living body. Individuals exist, but in interactive unity, not as self-contained beings whose

ALL THE WAY TO HEAVEN

inimitability gives them reason to show off or say to others, “I have no need of you” (1 Corinthians 12:21).

In this regard, Paul speaks of the gifts of the Spirit, which are variously given to individuals for the building up of the Church and the mutual edification of all its members. According to *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, “the health of the whole body depends upon the faithfulness with which each [member] makes use of his special endowment.”¹ Thus, one’s talents are not to be trumpeted as individual achievements; they are to be seen as God-given and consequently directed toward his ends. In brief, individual differences are pitched toward the salvation of the entire body.

Remembering our obligation to others in the face of our uniqueness is not always easy. Sometimes we want to dance in the end zone. But the antidote to excessive self-celebration is happiness and humility, which C. S. Lewis describes as a single package. In his book *Mere Christianity*, he ventures that a humble person is a happy, self-forgetful person—a person unmindful of his or her own humility.

Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call “humble” nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to *him*. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.²

Herein lies a deep Christian truth: those who achieve this blessed state of not thinking of themselves are blessed or happy in that very moment. This is not to say that future

LOSING SELF, FINDING PEACE

blessings will not also be theirs, only that in the present moment they are caught up to a happiness undiluted by concern for self.

The beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount announce this principle. They describe various gospel virtues—meekness, mercy, forbearance, and so on—as having intrinsic power to immediately happyfy those who practice them. These virtues were part of the “scandal” of the gospel,³ as the Apostle Paul put it, because they called into question cultural norms that associated happiness with worldly might, wealth, and advancement of self. Such norms were “the wisdom of this world” (who, after all, would think that happiness could be found amid want, persecution, and grief?), while the beatitudes were part of “the foolishness of God” (1 Corinthians 3:19; 1:25).

The word *Blessed* that begins each beatitude indicates a present condition, scholars tell us. It marks the beatific joy that accompanies Christian discipleship while recognizing that such joy, though complete at the moment, continues to grow over time like the seed of faith that Alma the Younger described. Thus each beatitude links a present state of happiness to the future realization of yet greater happiness, the former moment blossoming into the latter. One beatitude, for instance, states that those who are pure in heart shall see God, but the *Blessed* that begins the beatitude denotes happiness or blessedness right from the start *and* the natural expansion of that happiness as the purifying process unfolds toward the sublime moment of beholding the face of God. Alma correspondingly noted that even a tiny seed of faith—nothing more than a “particle of faith” (Alma 32:27)—was not something to be endured or suffered. Rather, once acted upon, it brings joy: “it beginneth to enlarge my soul,

ALL THE WAY TO HEAVEN

yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me" (v. 28).

Sometimes, of course, we must endure trials of faith, but the simple act of exercising faith in God—independent of whatever trial we may be passing through—is not onerous. Because it is an intrinsically good endeavor, it imparts strength and lifts one's spirit. This is to propose that God never leaves us comfortless; there is comfort and blessing to be found in living his commandments, and such kicks in the moment we decide to keep those commandments. "Because personal revelation is a constantly renewable source of strength, it is possible to feel bathed in help even during turbulent times," stated Relief Society General President Julie B. Beck.⁴ Or, as the medieval Catholic thinker Catherine of Siena insisted, "All the way to heaven is heaven." Once we step on the gospel path, the ground beneath our feet has a different, more vibrant bounce. This bounce is sometimes called grace, and it is the very taproot of our salvation. Without it we could never step on the gospel path in the first place.

THE GRACE-FILLED DELICIOUSNESS OF THE GOSPEL

The scriptures make this point about heaven-sent strength abundantly clear. When Paul instructs the Saints at Philippi to "work out [their] own salvation with fear and trembling," he may seem to be casting the entire burden of salvation on weak, erring human beings and leaving them bereft of heavenly help. But this is not the whole story, for he immediately adds, "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13).

LOSING SELF, FINDING PEACE

Now there is reason to believe that God will make up the difference between our weakness and his strength.

Or *help* us make up the difference. It is often hard to know in the working out of our salvation where we end and God begins. We are, Nephi said, saved by grace “after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23); but as Moroni also taught, we are saved by grace amid the things we *cannot* do. To his distress, Moroni felt he could not leave a powerful written testimony of Jesus Christ. It was then that the Lord told him that it didn’t matter; what mattered was the humility Moroni felt upon realizing his weakness, for that humility made him receptive to the Lord’s saving grace, and in that moment his weak testimony was made strong (see Ether 12:23–28). In my mind there is no testimony more beautiful and moving in all of scripture than that given by Moroni at the end of chapter 12 of the book of Ether. After declaring that he will meet us at “the judgment-seat of Christ” (v. 38), he states:

And then shall ye know that I have seen Jesus, and that he hath talked with me face to face, and that he told me in plain humility, even as a man telleth another in mine own language, concerning these things; and only a few have I written, because of my weakness in writing. And now, I would commend you to seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written, that the grace of God the Father, and also the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of them, may be and abide in you forever. Amen. (vv. 39–41)

Just before expressing this testimony, Moroni states that he was “comforted” when he learned that God would turn his weakness into strength, but the comfort he feels is not connected with concern for his own salvation (Ether 12:29). Rather, his concern all along has been for those

who will come later—that is, the descendants of those who will survive the Lamanite slaughter and, in the far-off future, the Gentiles among whom the Book of Mormon will make its latter-day appearance. Moroni, as noted earlier, is stretched out along the long arc of God’s love. If he is anxious, he is anxious for others. If he cannot fall asleep at night, it is not because he is reliving some private narrative of the day’s events, but because he, like Nephi, is pleading with the Lord on behalf of thousands, if not millions, of others. In his farewell words, Nephi states, “I pray continually for them [future generations of Nephites, Lamanites, and Gentiles] by day, and mine eyes water my pillow by night, because of them; and I cry unto my God in faith, and I know that he will hear my cry” (2 Nephi 33:3).

This sounds heavy. Who could bear up for very long under the strain of so much concern? Probably no normal man or woman. Note, however, that at least in their later years Nephi and Moroni do not seem to be weighed down with concern for their own salvation. Nothing they record indicates they are anxious about their own eternal welfare. Perhaps having surmounted that concern, they have been delivered by God’s love into a wider sphere of action. One thinks here of Joseph Smith’s words: “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.”⁵ Not that Nephi, Moroni, or Joseph Smith traveled the world over, but their focus was “the whole human race,” whether dead, living, or yet unborn.

Here again C. S. Lewis’s point about the happy, humble, self-forgetful person registers. At what point in our gospel progression do we begin to give up our anxious, self-centered quest for salvation? Evidently when the grace-filled deliciousness of the gospel has so expanded our souls

LOSING SELF, FINDING PEACE

that we want to share it with others. After making his way to the tree of life and tasting of the fruit that represented the love of God, Lehi did not continue feasting alone. His solitary quest suddenly expanded to include family: "As I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy; wherefore I began to be desirous that my family should partake of it also" (1 Nephi 8:12). At first his concern rested only on members of his immediate family, but it globalized in time to embrace generations unborn, as evidenced by the final blessings he pronounced on his grandchildren and their posterity. These blessings implicitly acknowledged the waywardness of his two older sons, neither of whom had partaken of the fruit of the tree of life in Lehi's vision, and included a promise of deliverance to their descendants from the curse of unbelief that Laman and Lemuel had inaugurated: "Wherefore, if ye are cursed, behold, I leave my blessing upon you, that the cursing may be taken from you and be answered upon the heads of your parents" (2 Nephi 4:6).

Lehi's expansive concern paralleled that of the once-reprobate sons of Mosiah who had been snatched by the love of God into light and joy. They "could not bear that any human soul should perish," should suffer the calamity of not being transported by divine love just as they had been (Mosiah 28:3). Accordingly, they devoted the remainder of their lives to missionary work, hoping to pass on the miracle of God's saving love to others and, it seems, no longer concerned about their own salvation.

FINDING HAPPINESS

Paramount concern with my salvation is a good place to start, but the straight and narrow gospel path engenders wide concern for others. We cannot stay on that path for very long without experiencing brief but liberating moments of ego oblivion. Jesus stated, "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it" (Luke 17:33). Unending concern for my salvation puts one at risk of narcissistic self-destruction. Letting larger concerns override my inclination to look in the mirror, though, works to my salvific advantage, but only because I take no interest in self-advancement. When asked whether self-aggrandizement was a true principle, Joseph Smith stated that it was, but then added that it "may be indulged upon only one rule or plan—and that is to elevate, benefit, and bless others first. If you will elevate others, the very work itself will exalt you. Upon no other plan can a man justly and permanently aggrandize himself."⁶

Surely this is something we all know at some level. "The greatest fulfillment in life comes by rendering service to others, and not by being obsessed with 'what's in it for me,'" taught President James E. Faust while serving in the Church's First Presidency.⁷ Indeed, Satan is our best example of how spiritual destruction overtakes those excessively concerned with individual exaltation. The quest for preeminence, especially spiritual preeminence, is sure to backfire, if only because that quest lives from the aspiration to rise above others. Satan was like the man who preemptively sat in the highest seat at the wedding feast, only to be removed from his place by the master of the feast (see Luke 14:7-11). Of course, few of us would openly angle for such a seat, but perhaps in small ways we do seek to elevate ourselves

LOSING SELF, FINDING PEACE

above others. This, however, can never work to our lasting advantage because the calculation to advance oneself at the expense of others reenacts in miniature Satan's grand aspiration.

If salvation founders on the reef of self-calculation, so also does happiness. The deliberate, all-consuming aspiration to be happy is, in fact, a recipe for unhappiness. "Happiness is not a goal, it is a by-product," observed former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. "Paradoxically, the one sure way not to be happy is deliberately to map out a way of life in which one would please oneself completely and exclusively."⁸ Leo Tolstoy expressed it this way: "Happiness founded upon vanity [self-interest] is destroyable by the same."⁹ And this from the Latter-day Saint scholar and poet Arthur Henry King: "If we aim at self-fulfillment, we shall never be fulfilled. If we aim at education, we shall never become educated. If we aim at salvation, we shall never be saved. These things are indirect, supreme results of doing something else; and the something else is service, it is righteousness, it is trying to do the right thing, the thing that needs to be done at each moment."¹⁰

These expressions coincide with the scriptural suggestion that happiness arrives in the wake of selfless behavior, although how quickly it arrives is not ours to say. Thus we live "after the manner of happiness" (2 Nephi 5:27), implicitly recognizing that our righteous actions conduce to happiness without constraining it. Happiness, like all things spiritual, springs up "without compulsory means" (Doctrine and Covenants 121:46). We can no more command it than we can command the wind, which Jesus likened to the saving spirit or the breath of life when he explained the principle of baptism to Nicodemus: "The wind [*pneuma* in Greek] bloweth where its listeth, and thou hearest the sound

thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is everyone that is born of the Spirit [*pneuma*]” (John 3:8). Thus there is always a spontaneous, gift-like quality to spiritual happiness answering to the fact that it is, after all, a gift from heaven. Accordingly, there is some aspect to it that overflows our expectations and is happily unpredictable and noncompulsory in its manner of arrival. Though we cannot fully control how and when such happy accidents will befall us, we do know that living the gospel makes us more accident-prone. “Most of all,” stated Elder Neal A. Maxwell, “revelation requires us to have a sufficient degree of personal righteousness, so that on occasion revelation may come to the righteous, unsolicited.”¹¹

My point is that, unlike most other things we aspire to accomplish, happiness and salvation cannot be taken by frontal assault. To use Roosevelt’s word, they are *by-products* of selfless behavior, gifts that come to us “without compulsory means” as we transcend our selfish need for them. Jesus Christ is our great exemplar here. In his epistle to the Philippians, Paul wrote that Christ, though in “the form of God,” “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (2:5–8). Though salvation was his for the asking, he did not ask for it, but rather meekly submitted himself to the anguish and ignominy of Gethsemane and Golgotha.

This is the nature of Christlike love: as Paul said, it “seeketh not her own” (1 Corinthians 13:5). Because it is self-forgetful, it releases us from the cares besetting those who struggle for happiness according to the “wisdom of the world”—that is, via the acquisition of personal wealth, influence, and status. More than that, it delivers us over to

the “foolishness of God” whereby we taste divine life in the here and now. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me,” said Jesus, “for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.” And then these amazing words: “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29–30).

“MY BURDEN IS LIGHT”

With so much at stake and so many wayward people to worry about and pray for, how could Christ’s disciples find his yoke easy and his burden light? Perhaps in the same way Moroni found comfort in realizing that divine grace had made up the difference between his own weakness and God’s power to save. That power came to his rescue as he was trying to rescue others (in the distant future). When Moroni lamented that his own strength and skill were not up to the task of conveying a powerful witness of God’s goodness, the Lord comforted him by promising to make up the shortfall. This is the manifestation of grace that so moves and touches Moroni—the divine assurance that his weakness will not be charged to his account at the last day. Indeed, it will somehow, in God’s economy, be credited to Moroni as righteousness and strength.

God, acting from limitless strength born of sacrificial love, is kind, forgiving, and strengthening to those who acknowledge their weakness. Satan, by contrast, accused his brethren “day and night” (Revelation 12:10), wishing to tear them down and having no strength to share with others because he had tried the ill-fated shortcut of exalting himself before working to exalt others. But no accusations await the humble followers of Christ. They have tapped

into the “pure river of water of life” mentioned by John in the book of Revelation: “clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Revelation 22:1). They know the peace that Jesus left in this world—not the hit-and-miss peace that “the world giveth,” but the lasting peace that floods one’s soul upon realizing that in the big picture of things Christ has taken care of everything we could possibly worry about. “Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid,” Christ told his disciples on the eve of his departure (John 14:27). “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (16:33).

To be sure, the peace of which Jesus speaks is hard to hold on to amid the turmoil of life, but that is because our faith wavers. When the waves of the storm-tossed sea begin to frighten us, we sink like Peter back into the cares of the world, into a milieu of doubt, fear, and uncertainty. The gospel, however, impels us toward a higher, truer understanding of things. “We speak the wisdom of God,” wrote Paul, “. . . even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: which none of the princes of this world knew.” This wisdom, Paul continues, could never be surmised from existing social and political structures, for such instantiate the uncertainties that the gospel dissipates. That wisdom comes only as God reveals it “unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God” (1 Corinthians 2:7–8, 10).

The peace of God signifies freedom from care, a leave-taking of the anxious concerns, physical and spiritual, that characterize normal experience. Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees for adding to these concerns by laying heavy religious burdens on others, “grievous to be borne,”

LOSING SELF, FINDING PEACE

while making no effort to ease the burdens of everyday life (Matthew 23:4). Jesus, on the other hand, advocated the lifting of burdens and, quite extraordinarily, a care-free life ("Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink," 6:25) patterned after the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field, which subsisted from moment to moment on God's overflowing goodness. This, of course, is not the whole story, for we are also commanded to labor, to prepare for times of need, and to work to overcome our sinful tendencies. But it is, I believe, the higher part of the story; that is, the rest of God to be found in this world, which rest overtakes us as we lay down the burden of our own salvation while, like Jesus, lifting others' burdens. Thus the gospel path is both hard and easy; hard because it entails assuming others' burdens, but easy because by those burdens we win fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ, who, unlike the scribes and Pharisees, takes away burdens and gives rest.

"Be careful for nothing," wrote Paul, "but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Philippians 4:6). The translation is a bit stilted here, for in telling the Saints at Philippi to "be careful for nothing," Paul was not advocating inattentiveness to everyday needs. Rather, he was counseling the Saints to lighten their cares by prayerfully sharing them with the Lord. He didn't promise that those cares would go away, but he did insist that the blessing of such sharing is incalculably great: "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (v. 7).

We could never experience this peace in an abstract or theoretical way, but only as our mortal hurts compel us to cry out to God, who, as the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said, "is the great companion—the fellow suf-

ALL THE WAY TO HEAVEN

ferer who understands.”¹² And, I might add, who gives relief that “passeth all understanding.” If we invite God into our lives, our earthly hurts can function as kindling that catches fire as he draws near. Thereby we realize that God is not distant after all, though the erstwhile sense of his remoteness is the backdrop against which our realization of God’s nearness flares into existence. Thus, as Lehi stated, there is “opposition in all things” and existence is “a compound in one” (2 Nephi 2:11). Our separation from God is the precondition for our rescue by him, which rescue is deeply felt, and deeply treasured, in the midst of mortal extremity. Indeed, by that rescue we are lifted up to the sublimity of Paul’s witness of Christ in his epistle to the Philippians: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (1:21). In Christ we live, die, and live anew.

NOTES

1. *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, ed. Frederick Carl Eiselen, Edwin Lewis, and David G. Downey (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), 1187.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1960), 114.
3. The word *scandal* derives from the Greek word *skandalon*, meaning an “offense” or “stumbling block” and translated as *stumbling-block* in 1 Corinthians 1:23 (King James Version).
4. Julie B. Beck, “And upon the Handmaids in Those Days Will I Pour Out My Spirit,” *Ensign*, May 2010.
5. Joseph Smith, History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842], 1115, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/>. Joseph Smith continues: “[T]his has been your feeling and caused you to forego the pleasures of home, that you might be a blessing to others, who are candidates for immortality, but strangers to truth.” Brigham Young stated: “Every person that confines his thoughts and labors to happifying his own family and

LOSING SELF, FINDING PEACE

immediate friends will come far short of performing the duties devolving upon him. Every sentiment and feeling should be to cleanse the earth from wickedness, to purify the people, sanctify the nations, gather the nations of Israel home, redeem and build up Zion, redeem Jerusalem and gather the Jews there, and establish the reign and kingdom of God on earth." In *Journal of Discourses*, 8:294.

6. Quoted in Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus, *They Knew the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 61.
7. James E. Faust, "What's in It for Me?," *Ensign*, November, 2002, 22.
8. Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn by Living* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 95.
9. *The Diaries of Leo Tolstoy: Youth, 1847-1852*, trans. C. J. Hogarth and A. Sirnis (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1917), 98.
10. Arthur Henry King, *The Abundance of the Heart* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 255.
11. Neal A. Maxwell, "Revelation," *First Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting, January 11, 2003* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 5, accessible at <https://laconicisms.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/first-worldwide-leadership-training-meeting-11-jan-2003.pdf>.
12. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 351.