

God Loves You

ROLLIN H. HOTCHKISS

I testify that God, our Heavenly Father, loves each of you. He knows your name. He knows your circumstances. He hears your prayers and wants to bless you in every righteous desire through His Son, Jesus Christ. Like Alma, “I testify unto you that I do know that these things . . . are true. . . . They are made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God” (Alma 5:45–46). I know these things because of my own journey. And if Heavenly Father loves me and knows of me—since He is no respecter of persons—He loves you as well.

My purpose today is to share with you five facets of my testimony that show God loves us. These are simple and quite personal. I pray that your testimony of God’s love for you will grow as you think of your own experiences and that together we may receive the “word of truth” through the Holy Ghost (D&C 50:17). I hope that as I speak, you will contemplate the many ways that God loves you. As I conclude today, I will ask you a question: “So what are you going to do?”

First: I testify that God loves us because He grants unto us the revelator known as the Holy Ghost.

It was October of 1972, a clear and sunny Sunday. I was a freshman at BYU. I rode my bicycle up Provo Canyon to Upper Falls. There

I contemplated what in the world I was doing here. You see, I came to BYU as a nonmember. Why? Well, several friends at high school were going to BYU, and they simply invited me along. I applied to BYU, and when my parents and I visited campus, coming from smoggy and dry Southern California, we were sold. I knew very little about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints except that they didn’t smoke or drink.

I had arrived on campus a week or so early to attend a late summer honors program. There I met my first roommate, Rahn Price. After a long day we were ready to go to sleep in our room in Deseret Towers (may they rest in peace). Then something unusual happened. Rahn rolled out of bed, knelt at his bedside, and prayed silently. I didn’t know what to do. I was quite astonished. I finally said my own prayer:

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
Should I die before I wake,*

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*I pray the Lord my soul to take.
Amen.*

I was done well before he was. Much later, Rahn said that was the most awkward prayer he had ever said. However, I'm grateful that he did say that prayer.

As the semester began, I learned about agency from a Book of Mormon teacher named Bruce Hafen. I learned of the Atonement. Although I had grown up in a Christian church and was raised by "goodly parents" (1 Nephi 1:1), these concepts were certainly deeper than the wading pool of doctrine I had grown up with.

Once the semester began, my friends in Helaman Halls invited me to church, but I respectfully declined. They did not pester me or make me feel out of place. On Sundays I would just do my own activities, limited as they were by a bicycle.

I found that agency—a topic I had been learning about in my Book of Mormon class—was interesting as presented in the dorms. It was fast Sunday (whatever that meant), and when my floor went off to church, I went down to the Cannon Center for a casual breakfast. But there was no breakfast because it was fast Sunday. I hadn't planned to fast, but it appeared that I would be fasting even though I hadn't planned on it. This was in the day when you didn't have refrigerators and microwave ovens in each dorm room. There was no food there. I was suddenly faced with my own mortality—I knew I was going to die. I figured I had just enough strength left to make it to some local restaurant. Der Wienerschnitzel was the closest. All I needed was a little food to tide me over until the obligatory fast Sunday concluded in the dorms. So I ordered about a dozen hot dogs. I've been grateful to Der Wienerschnitzel ever since.

But thankfully I matured. With the help of Rahn, my other friends, Brother Hafen, and my own budding awareness of the beauti-

ful doctrines of the gospel, a seed had been planted. And on that October Sunday morning at Upper Falls, I actually asked Heavenly Father a question—something I was not taught to do growing up. Like most, I was taught that you can ask for blessings. It had never really occurred to me to ask Heavenly Father a question, because that implied you expected an answer—that you expected God to actually hear your prayer and acknowledge it with some sort of communication. It wasn't even a question about the Church I had at that time. I wasn't ready for that just yet. It was a question about me: "What wouldst thou have me do?" For the first time in my life I felt what I knew in an instant was the Holy Ghost, that unmistakably distinct and identifiable feeling in my bosom that has since guided me in all matters spiritual and most temporal: a warmth—not alarming or acidic, but peaceful and calm—that gave me clarity and resolve. Like the answer cited by Sister Matsumori in October's general conference: "It felt like sunshine" (Vicki F. Matsumori, "Helping Others Recognize the Whisperings of the Spirit," *Ensign*, November 2009, 10).

What was my answer? That I had a special mission to perform. I had no idea what that meant. It didn't matter at that time, because what I had found out that day was that God lives, that He knew who I was, and that, whatever He was doing at the time, He had answered my prayer through the Holy Ghost. I've been grateful ever since and have tried to demonstrate that gratitude by serving Him. My view of the world had changed: from peering through a keyhole at life to having an eternal panorama opened to my heart and mind's view.

If God loved me enough to answer my prayer, I know that He loves each of you.

Second: I testify that God loves you because He restored the priesthood, and the Aaronic Priesthood in particular, to the earth. I testify that His love is manifest through the gift of the

ministering of angels that can protect us and comfort us as we learn more about Him.

Since that day in October my heart was prepared to receive the gospel. I learned by study and also by faith. I noted that Rahn held the Aaronic Priesthood and was a priest in that priesthood. Through sacred experiences we had together, I know that the Aaronic Priesthood encompasses the power of God and the keys of the ministering of angels. I know that such keys are a gift to young men in the Church who love Him. It is something to be desired. At the time, I identified with Simon, the sorcerer of the New Testament, who said, “Give me also this power” (Acts 8:19). Although Simon spoke of the Melchizedek Priesthood, I was desiring this Aaronic Priesthood. I know that the priesthood—Melchizedek and Aaronic—is God’s love made manifest to us to protect and serve. When you return home soon and see those gangly young Aaronic Priesthood holders in your ward, you might remember to thank them for carrying the power of God within them.

Third: I testify that Heavenly Father loves us because He blesses us so much as we try to serve Him. He meets us much more than half-way when we act on the smallest seed of faith. He blesses us all along our journey back to His presence when we incline our ear and heart toward Him.

December 2, 1972, was a clear and crisp day. It was the day of my baptism. All the guys on my floor in Helaman Halls were up early getting ready for the service. But of course nobody said a word to me. It’s a guy thing—like baseball players who don’t want to jinx a pitcher who goes into the seventh inning with a no-hitter. I was both amused and impressed.

Who but Rahn Price baptized me? I received the gift of the Holy Ghost, which spirit had led me to the place I was at that time (see D&C 6:14). I received the priesthood and felt the whole armor of God. Thank you, Rahn. A few months later I was ordained a priest in the

Aaronic Priesthood by Norm Nemrow. (You might know him as Professor Nemrow here at BYU.) Thank you, Norm.

I was soon called as a home teacher. I was excited to serve with this Aaronic Priesthood that I had so much desired. One evening I had a particularly vexing physics homework assignment to do. I also had home teaching appointments. For the first time I faced a test of my new faith. What to do? Up until that time intellect had been the king of my hill, my lofty aspiration. But now? How did faith work once you were baptized? Would Heavenly Father turn His attention elsewhere now that I was within the Church? I went home teaching. When I returned to my dorm room to tackle Physics 121, all I can say is that Heavenly Father magnified my efforts in a very personal and significant way. I had not known that the Holy Ghost could teach physics. I’ve never forgotten that lesson of being blessed beyond what I merited at the time. I was strengthened, confirmed in my faith, and encouraged.

King Benjamin put it this way:

I say unto you that if ye should serve him who 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—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants.

And behold, all that he requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised you that if ye would keep his commandments ye should prosper in the land; and he never doth vary from that which he hath said; therefore, if ye do keep his commandments he doth bless you and prosper you.

And now, in the first place, he hath created you, and granted unto you your lives, for which ye are indebted unto him.

And secondly, he doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you; for which if ye do, he doth immediately bless you; and therefore he hath paid you. And ye are still indebted unto him, and

are, and will be, forever and ever; therefore, of what have ye to boast? [Mosiah 2:21–24]

Heavenly Father blesses us so that our seeds of faith can grow all of our lives to produce a harvest of happiness as we put the kingdom of God first and allow everything else to follow (see Matthew 6:33). The Lord said, “I will go before you and be your rearward; and I will be in your midst, and you shall not be confounded” (D&C 49:27). I agree with Nephi, who said, “My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep” (2 Nephi 4:20). Each effort I make, no matter how small, is blessed greatly. God is truly generous with His love.

My faith was tried more seriously as I considered what to do about a full-time mission as a convert to the Church. I testify that as I exerted my faith, Heavenly Father strengthened my heart and melted the hearts of my parents, who had been adamantly opposed to my serving. But Heavenly Father went before my face and softened their hearts. I was able to serve with their blessing, and in giving back some of the love I had been given, as I served, I received, as usual, more blessings than I deserved.

I know that God will support you as you look to Him in every good thing. He’s got your back! Selfless service at any time increases our gratitude for God.

Fourth: I testify that God loves us because He wants us to have everything that He has; He puts no limits on how much we can learn, grow, and progress. Our friend Stephen Covey calls it an “abundance mentality” versus a “scarcity mentality.” Heavenly Father calls it the “plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8), the plan that can “bring to pass [our] immortality and eternal life” (Moses 1:39).

I remember when I walked upstairs in the original Harold B. Lee Library that in the stairwell I was confronted with the scripture “Seek

learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). I was initially shocked at such a thing, but after my October experience and others like it, I came to know that there is no limit to how much we can learn, love, and live. William W. Phelps put it this way in verses 4 and 5 of his hymn:

*There is no end to virtue;
There is no end to might;
There is no end to wisdom;
There is no end to light.
There is no end to union;
There is no end to youth;
There is no end to priesthood;
There is no end to truth.*

*There is no end to glory;
There is no end to love;
There is no end to being;
There is no death above.
There is no end to glory;
There is no end to love;
There is no end to being;
There is no death above.*

[“If You Could Hie to Kolob,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 284]

President Uchtdorf recently summarized:

Our Father in Heaven has given us, His children, much more than any mortal mind can comprehend. Under His direction the Great Jehovah created this wondrous world we live in. God the Father watches over us, fills our hearts with breathtaking joy, brightens our darkest hours with blessed peace, distills upon our minds precious truths, shepherds us through times of distress, rejoices when we rejoice, and answers our righteous petitions.

*He offers to His children the promise of a glorious and infinite existence and has provided a way for us to progress in knowledge and glory until we receive a fulness of joy. He has promised us all that He has. [Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Love of God,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 22]*

We're really tested with this concept as parents. Our oldest daughter has borne the brunt of much of our learning. (Come to think about it, though, our other three children didn't fare much better.) But as an active teenager, she would ask if she could go do this or that with her friends. Her requests were always reasonable, and she reminds us often that we were lucky that she even asked. But I remember once telling her no. She, of course, wanted to know why. I said, "Because I'm your father, and I figure every once in awhile I should exercise that right and just say no." Well, how silly that was! Heavenly Father doesn't do that because He doesn't exercise such capricious constraints. She and I talked for quite awhile that night because she justifiably called me on my section 121 violation (see verses 39–46). So I let her go and demonstrated my love and trust for her.

In addition to Heavenly Father not constraining us capriciously, I know that He loves us because He is anxious to impart all knowledge into our hands:

Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms. [D&C 88:79]

The knowledge that comes by the Holy Ghost through faith and prayer could be very useful to you in the upcoming days.

Fifth: I testify that God loves us because He sent His Son to atone for our sins and for the sins of all humankind everywhere. This is the most powerful manifestation of all. I felt it first as I prepared for baptism and now each week as I prepare to receive the sacrament.

The Atonement has been written about for centuries by prophets both ancient and modern, but is it written in our hearts? The Atonement is not an academic abstract that is

learned like the multiplication tables. If we are prepared, like Nephi and Enos, the Atonement can sink deep in our hearts and fill us with wonder (see 1 Nephi 11–14; Enos 1:3).

The manner of receiving the teaching of the Atonement is illustrated with the examples of Nephi and his elder-in-age but younger-in-spirit brothers, Laman and Lemuel.

Nephi, in seeking an interpretation of his father Lehi's dream, had a discourse with an angel:

And it came to pass after I had seen the tree, I said unto the Spirit: I behold thou hast shown unto me the tree which is precious above all.

And he said unto me: What desirest thou?

And I said unto him: To know the interpretation thereof. . . .

It's interesting that the angel didn't just tell Nephi the interpretation. As a matter of fact, the angel could have made a nice spreadsheet of the vision, with the symbols across the top in columns and the explanation in the next row. But instead:

It came to pass that he said unto me: Look! . . .

And it came to pass that I looked and beheld the great city of Jerusalem, and also other cities. And I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin, and she was exceedingly fair and white.

And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou?

And I said unto him: A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.

And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God?

And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.

And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.

And it came to pass that I beheld that she was carried away in the Spirit; and after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time the angel spake unto me, saying: Look!

And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms.

And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?

Well? Had the angel made a spreadsheet? No! Nephi experienced the answer:

And I answered him, saying: Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things.

And he spake unto me, saying: Yea, and the most joyous to the soul. [1 Nephi 11:9–23]

The love of God is the most desirable and joyous to the soul. Later Nephi testified:

And I, Nephi, saw that he was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world. [1 Nephi 11:33]

The Atonement had sunk deep into Nephi's heart.

Contrast this with Laman and Lemuel's experience. They had dismissed the visit of an angel (see 1 Nephi 3:31), did not believe the words of their father (see 1 Nephi 2:11–12), and found "the truth to be hard" (1 Nephi 16:2). When they asked Nephi about the interpretation of each element of the dream, Nephi simply gave them the spreadsheet explanation. Although the Atonement had taken root in the fleshy portion of Nephi's heart (see 2 Corinthians 3:3), the hardened hearts of Laman and Lemuel remained unchanged (see 1 Nephi 16:22).

The Atonement is a gift from Heavenly Father through His Son that we especially need

to remember at this time of year. It was the ultimate gift of both the Father and the Son: of the Father because He allowed His Son to suffer; of the Son because of what He did for us. Even football fans know the most famous scripture of all:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. [John 3:16]

A glimpse of our Heavenly Father's anguish came to me several years ago during a high-adventure trip with my oldest son and several members of his priest's quorum. We had gone to the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington. One of the activities the boys wanted to do was ride their bicycles on the paved road down from the top of Mount Constitution. I've done a bit of riding in my life, and I encouraged the boys to first ride up the mountain so they could remember where the gravel, the cracks in the pavement, the tightest turns, and other such potential hazards were. But of course that was too hard. So we took all the boys and the bikes to the top and all started down. I came down last, and I helped pick up each boy as each crashed at a different location. My son, for example, had entered a hairpin turn going hopelessly too fast. He had a choice: go over the railing or lay the bike down. With brakes tightly squeezed, he laid the bike down and skidded for some distance on the asphalt. His T-shirt rolled up his back, and he received quite a road rash, including embedded bits of small gravel and tar.

Like any unprepared Scout troop, our only cleaning agent in the first-aid kit was alcohol. As I watched his friends begin to clean the wounds on his back with the alcohol, I simply could not bear to watch. The pain must have been excruciating, and I could not stand to see my son suffer.

I know that Heavenly Father hurt at the sight of His Son's suffering. I know that both Heavenly Father and His Son love us.

President Uchtdorf summarized God's love for us this way:

*Though we are incomplete, God loves us completely.
Though we are imperfect, He loves us perfectly.
Though we may feel lost and without compass,
God's love encompasses us completely.*

He loves us because He is filled with an infinite measure of holy, pure, and indescribable love. We are important to God not because of our résumé but because we are His children. He loves every one of us, even those who are flawed, rejected, awkward, sorrowful, or broken. God's love is so great that He loves even the proud, the selfish, the arrogant, and the wicked.

What this means is that, regardless of our current state, there is hope for us. No matter our distress, no matter our sorrow, no matter our mistakes, our infinitely compassionate Heavenly Father desires that we draw near to Him so that He can draw near to us. [See D&C 88:63.] ["The Love of God," 22–23]

In conclusion I testify that God our Heavenly Father loves each of you. He knows your name. He knows your circumstances. He hears your prayers and wants to bless you in every righteous desire through His Son Jesus Christ.

I'm grateful to have had the opportunity of attending BYU those many years ago. I'm grateful for the Spirit that is here both then and now. I truly am.

So here is my question: What are you going to do? I pray that you might feel inspired this season to use Heavenly Father's love for you as a verb. And I pray that what you need to do will be revealed to you through prayer. The Primary children have it right:

*I know my Father lives and loves me too.
The Spirit whispers this to me and tells me it is true,
And tells me it is true.*

["I Know My Father Lives," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 302]

I add my testimony that it is true, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.