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The Miracle of Covenant Belonging

The harmony of our covenants and the Atonement of Jesus Christ is heard in melodies and descants as drawing on our Savior’s Atonement helps us fulfill our covenants in a new and holier way.

In the school of mortal life, the Lord invites us to learn and grow in lifelong and eternal ways by loving Him first and by strengthening one another in His love.

Strengthening one another in the Lord and in His love is embodied in the first and second great commandments. As a First Presidency letter recently taught, “The Savior’s ministry exemplifies the two great commandments: ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind’ and ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’ (Matthew 22:37, 39).” The First Presidency letter continued: “In that spirit, Jesus also taught, ‘Ye are they whom I have chosen to minister unto this people’ (3 Nephi 13:25).”¹

The song of our risen Savior’s redeeming love celebrates the harmony of covenants, which connects us to God and to each other; and the Atonement of Jesus Christ, which helps us put off the natural man and woman and yield to the sanctifying “enticings of the Holy Spirit” (Mosiah 3:19).

That harmony is expressed in the plan of happiness, where we learn and grow by daily exercise of individual moral agency and where we are not left to wander on our own but are given a covenant path and the gift of the Holy Ghost. Alpha and Omega (see Doctrine and Covenants 61:1), the Lord Jesus Christ, is with us from the beginning. And He is with us to the end, when “God shall wipe away all tears from [our] eyes” (Revelation 7:17), except our tears of joy.

MUSIC NOTES FROM GETTY IMAGES



Our covenants connect us to God and to each other. Meant to be eternal, our covenants include God our Eternal Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Eternal covenants can bring the power of God's love—to give hope and increase love; to lift and transform; to edify and sanctify; to redeem and exalt.

In the revelation of our true, divine selves through our covenants with God, we learn to recognize and love our brothers and sisters as He does. This deepening love and knowledge invites, empowers, and sanctifies us to know and, in our own way, to become more like Him.

Covenants and the Lord's Atonement

The harmony of our covenants and the Atonement of Jesus Christ is heard in melodies and descants as drawing on our Savior's Atonement helps us fulfill our covenants in a new and holier way.² Together, our covenants and our Savior's Atonement can shape what we desire, perceive, and experience in daily mortality and prepare us for the sociality of heaven (see Doctrine and Covenants 130:2).

Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, we find faith, strength, and trust to come unto Christ, knowing that perfection is in Him. Such knowledge offers an escape from the always-anxious treadmill of perfectionism. There may be some truth in the song "Let It Go"³ if "let it go" means "let go" of self-imposed worldly expectations that can never satisfy and if it also means "hold on" to the God-given heavenly hopes and promises the Lord offers.

Have you noticed that each ordinance calls us by our name and connects us by our name to the name of Jesus Christ?

Ordinances are universal and particular (individual) at the same time. Years ago, as the high

councilor responsible for stake baptisms, I noticed that the baptismal ordinance was outwardly the same for each person but individually distinct in that each person baptized was called, one by one, by their name, and their name was connected by covenant to "the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (3 Nephi 11:25).

Amazing grace is as universal and unique as our Savior Himself. A Lamb without blemish, He set the pattern by being baptized to fulfill all righteousness (see 2 Nephi 31:6). The scriptures call it, and our missionaries teach it as, "the doctrine of Christ" (2 Nephi 31:21; see also 3 Nephi 11:38–40). The doctrine of Christ includes "follow[ing] the example of Jesus Christ by being baptized by someone holding the priesthood authority of God."⁴

We enter through the gate of repentance and baptism by water, "and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost" (2 Nephi 31:17). The strait and narrow path—the covenant path—leads to eternal life (see 2 Nephi 31:18). It is part of how we are each strengthened in His love.

Our covenants and the Atonement of Jesus Christ connect us in other ways as well.

Covenant Belonging

By divine covenant, we belong to God and to each other. Covenant belonging is a miracle. It is not possessive. Like charity, it "suffereth long, and is kind," and it "envieth not; . . . vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up" (1 Corinthians 13:4; see also Moroni 7:45). Covenant belonging gives roots and wings. It liberates through commitment. It enlarges through love.

In covenant belonging, we strengthen each other in the Savior's love, thereby coming more to love God and each other. This happens in part because covenant belonging "seeketh not



To belong to God and to each other in covenant belonging is to smile in unexpected places as we see with eyes to see and hear with ears to hear. He changes us and our relationships—including our covenant marriage—to become more sanctified and divine.

In one marriage relations class, a married student raised her hand and said to the teacher, “Pardon me, you keep saying marriage is hard. It is not marriage that is hard but *life* that is hard, and marriage, with its ups and

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her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil” (1 Corinthians 13:5). Covenant belonging “rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth” (1 Corinthians 13:6). Covenant belonging is to come and see face to face, knowing even as we are known (see 1 Corinthians 13:12). Our covenant faithfulness is steadfast and immovable (see Mosiah 5:15; Alma 1:25).

Covenant belonging is to hope all things, endure many things, and “hope to be able to endure all things” (see Articles of Faith 1:13; see also 1 Corinthians 13:7; Moroni 7:45). Covenant belonging is to keep the faith. It is not to give up on ourselves, on each other, or on God.

Covenant belonging is to delight with those who delight and to rejoice with those who have cause to rejoice, and to stand as witnesses of God’s tender mercies and daily miracles “at all times and in all things, and in all places” (see Mosiah 18:8–9).

downs, can be a blessing where we get to face the joys and challenges of life together.”

While eternal marriage is our ideal, infidelities, abuse of any kind, and unsurmountable incompatibilities may necessitate immediate protective action or separation and possibly divorce. We know that covenants are binding and eternal only by mutual consent of the parties affected and when confirmed by a merciful heaven’s manifestation of the Holy Ghost, which the scriptures describe as “the Holy Spirit of promise” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:3).

There is comfort, peace, and hope in the Lord’s assurance that worthy individuals will receive all promised blessings.⁵ It is part of His promise to strengthen each of us in His love, in His way, and in His time (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:68).

“The Way Service Works”

When I was a young bishop, an experience in our ward taught me about covenant belonging as manifested in the strengthening of one another in the Savior’s love. Ward families Hans and Fay Ritter and Larry and Tina O’Connor, along with other wonderful families, were constantly ministering to others and were beloved by all.



One day our stake president asked if I would check on the Ritters. When I arrived at their home, I noticed some sagging in the floor and a well-used kettle.

“Bishop, it’s like this,” Brother Ritter said. “Our water heater leaked, and warm water seeped through the floor. Termites came. That’s why the floor sags a little. We had to shut off the water heater, and that’s why we heat water in a kettle.”

The Ritters agreed to let me discuss their situation with our ward council. Our ward council was amazing. Members knew someone who could help with floors or walls or carpets or appliances or paint. Volunteers came and helped in countless generous ways. Among them was Larry O’Connor, a skilled builder who was frequently at the Ritters’ house.

Larry’s wife, Tina, recalled that Larry and other quorum members would sometimes go to the Ritters on Friday and stay all night. “One Saturday morning, I took them breakfast,” she said. “There was Larry coming out of a bathroom holding plumbing tools.”

Tina added that it was from men like Hans Ritter and others “that my husband learned to become a man—kind, thoughtful, tender. As my Larry served together with such good men, including in the nursery, he became an even more wonderful husband and father.”

When the house was finished, we all rejoiced.

Hans and Fay Ritter have been gone for some time, but I spoke recently with two of their sons, Ben and Stephen. They remember that the quiet service of others maintained the dignity of their father, who worked tirelessly to take care of his family.

While at a ward activity not long after the Ritters’ home was completed, Larry and Tina O’Connor received emergency word that their

home was on fire. They rushed to their home and everywhere saw broken windows (to vent smoke) and punctured walls (to check for hidden flames).

“We were devastated,” Tina said. But then the ward came.

“Everyone helped,” Tina and Larry said. “The whole ward came together in love. We were there as a family.”

And who were among the first to come and the last to leave as the O’Connor home was being rebuilt? Yes, the Hans and Fay Ritter family.

Ben and Stephen are modest but remember their family coming to help the O’Connors. “We were all there together,” they said. “That’s the way service works. We all take care of each other, sometimes by helping others and sometimes by allowing others to help us.”

To me, there can be a wondrous, virtuous, harmonious circle as we strengthen each other in the Savior’s love. The O’Connors help the Ritters, the Ritters help the O’Connors, and all the while a community of Latter-day Saints is being established. Each day in myriad ways, we each need, and can offer, ministering love and support in small, simple, powerful, life-changing ways.

And thus, we experience a double loaves-and-fishes miracle: first, a community of Saints can rally in magnificent selfless unity to address a dramatic need; and second, simultaneously, a fellowship of Saints can be knit together in love through daily, loving ministering in many quiet circumstances—as in a family, branch, ward, or community over many years—independent of any dramatic need.

Strengthened in the Savior’s Love

All of this brings us back to where we began—the first and second great commandments and the invitation to be strengthened and to

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President Russell M. Nelson has powerfully said, "Our message to the world is simple and sincere: we invite all of God's children on both sides of the veil to come unto their Savior, receive the blessings of the holy temple, have enduring joy, and qualify for eternal life."⁶

As we feast upon the words of Christ (see 2 Nephi 32:3) and put God first (see Matthew 6:33), the Lord strengthens and blesses every aspect of our lives. There is divine harmony and resonance in covenant belonging as we are strengthened in the Lord's love and as we strengthen each other in Him.

The words of the Apostle Paul echo the harmony of our covenants and the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . .

"For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers,

nor things present, nor things to come,

"Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35, 38–39).

Such is also my solemn testimony.

I testify of God our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. They know us better and love us more than we know or love ourselves. We can trust in the Lord with all our heart and need not lean unto our own understanding (see Proverbs 3:5).

In 159 houses of the Lord in 43 countries, we can be strengthened in the Lord through our covenants and the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

We are blessed by priesthood authority and continuing prophetic revelation from the Prophet Joseph Smith to our dear President Nelson today. Events of recent days have made me even more certain of, and humbled by, the reality of restored doctrine, keys, ordinances, and covenants in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as "the Lord's kingdom once again established on the earth, preparatory to the Second Coming of the Messiah."⁷

The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ and all of the holy scriptures are the word of God.

May we each come to know our Savior better and become more like Him as we are strengthened in the Lord and as we strengthen each other in Him and His love. ■

From a Brigham Young University Women's Conference address, "Strengthen One Another in the Lord," delivered on May 4, 2018.

NOTES

1. First Presidency letter, Apr. 2, 2018.
2. See Russell M. Nelson, "Ministering," *Ensign or Liahona*, May 2018, 100.
3. "Let It Go," *Frozen* (2013).
4. *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (2004), 40.
5. See *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (2010), 1.3.3.
6. Russell M. Nelson, "Let Us All Press On," *Ensign or Liahona*, May 2018, 118–19.
7. Introduction to the Book of Mormon.

