

“God’s Love: The Most Joyous to the Soul” **Sunny Mahe**

This address was given in May 2023
at the BYU Women’s Conference
©2023 by Brigham Young University Women’s Conference
All rights reserved.

For further information, email:
womens_conference@byu.edu
or write to:
253 Harman Continuing Education Building
Provo, Utah 84602
801-422-7692
Website: womensconference.byu.edu

This talk may be used for Church or personal use only, commercial use is prohibited.

I’m so excited to be back here in the Smith Fieldhouse! I used to perform here for large crowds...wearing spandex. I’m thrilled to be back, and equally thrilled to not be wearing spandex.

I love talking about the topic of God’s love. I feel that’s where my testimony begins. Like Nephi:

1 Nephi 11:17 says, “...I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.”

In reference to God’s love, President Thomas S. Monson said, “It is simply always there.”¹

But I also know that in my life that there have been times that it has been difficult to feel that love. I wanted to expose a few of the obstacles I have experienced that make it difficult to feel God’s love. And some practical ways to make it easier to feel it.

So, why is it sometimes difficult to feel God’s love?

Three obstacles I want to discuss today are:

1. We experience trials.
2. We do not recognize answers to prayers.
3. We do not feel worthy or enough.

We Experience Trials

This is what my family looked like in 2016 (*picture not available*).

I want to talk for a second about 3-year-old Elsie. Elsie was full of life and mischief. She picked neighbors' flowers and made herself peanut butter hats. She was playful and silly. She was terribly afraid of BYU's Cosmo the Cougar.

On Tuesday November 22, 2016, I was at home with these 3 little ones after sending the big kids off to school. I had a neighbor's two kids over to play with Elsie and Tank. I was busy with household chores and the kids were alternately laughing, playing nicely together, and then tattling about not sharing toys or saying sassy words (*picture not available*).

At one point, as I was washing the dishes in the kitchen, Elsie's little friend tapped me on the hip and said, "Elsie's hanging by the string." That seemed like a strange thing to tattle about, and I didn't think much of it until she followed up with "no, like she needs help."

I was a little frustrated as I thought of how I never get anything done around here. So, I didn't even turn off the water in the sink and I walked to the front room where I found Elsie had become entangled in a cord from our window blinds.

I quickly took her down and began CPR, even starting her heart and getting her to take breaths on her own before the paramedics came. But even though we experienced many miracles that gave us great hope, ultimately my funny, naughty, full of life Elsie, died after a week in the hospital.

I guess a part of me thought that when you are doing the good things and checking the boxes, you could expect a certain amount of protection from these kinds of trials. I mean-I was doing service, right? I was washing dishes for my family and watching a friend's kids so she could go to an appointment.

Isn't that how it works? We do all we can, and God makes up the rest by protecting us from heartache.

Well, Elder D. Todd Christofferson said, "We ought not to think of God's plan as a cosmic vending machine where we

1. Select a desired blessing,
2. Insert the required sum of good works, and
3. The order is promptly delivered."²

He goes on to explain that while our obedience and good works matter, it is more because of the way that those things change us and make us better rather than because we are purchasing blessings or protection.

So, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I can testify today that the cosmic vending machine is broken.

So, if that's not how it works, then how do we protect ourselves from painful trials?

Well, more bad news. We don't.

All of us must experience trials here on this earth.

And our trials will be big, they will be heavy and difficult. And it can seem like a loving Father would not subject His children to such burdens.

But, there are countless examples in the scriptures that teach us that no matter how righteous you are, you will have trials.

Having trials, even big painful ones, is not an accurate measuring stick of whether or not we are loved by God.

There seems to be no limit to the number of ways that a heart can break - whether it be through our own choices, the choices of others that affect us, or the natural consequences of living in a fallen world.

But we came here to become like Christ.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, "Therefore, how can you and I really expect to glide naively through life, as if to say, 'Lord, give me experience, but not grief, not sorrow, not pain, not opposition, not betrayal, and certainly not to be forsaken. Keep from me, Lord, all those experiences which made Thee what Thou art! Then let me come and dwell with Thee and fully share Thy joy!'"³

You are loved through your trials, but you will have them. If you find yourself currently in a season of relative ease, take the time to gather strength and oil for your testimony lamp because trials are not an opt-in part of this earthly experience.

We Do Not Recognize Answers to Prayers (The Drowning Man)

A fellow was stuck on his rooftop in a flood (*picture not available*). He was praying to God for help.

Soon a man in a rowboat came by and the fellow shouted to the man on the roof, "Jump in, I can save you."

The stranded fellow shouted back, "No, it's OK, I'm praying to God, and he is going to save me."

So, the rowboat went on.

Then a motorboat came by. The fellow in the motorboat shouted, "Jump in, I can save you."

To this the stranded man said, "No thanks, I'm praying to God, and he is going to save me. I have faith."

So, the motorboat went on.

Then a helicopter came by, and the pilot shouted down, “Grab this rope and I will lift you to safety.”

To this the stranded man again replied, “No thanks, I’m praying to God, and he is going to save me. I have faith.”

So, the helicopter reluctantly flew away.

Soon the water rose above the rooftop and the man drowned. He went to Heaven. He finally got his chance to discuss this whole situation with God, at which point he exclaimed, “I had faith in you, but you didn’t save me, you let me drown. I don’t understand why!”

To this God replied, “I sent you a rowboat and a motorboat and a helicopter, what more did you expect?”

Spencer W. Kimball said, “God does notice us, and he watches over us. But it is usually through another person that he meets our needs.”⁴

Sometimes the answers don’t look the way we think they should.

In 2 Kings 4, the widow of a faithful disciple approaches the prophet Elisha to tell him that her deceased husband left her in terrible debt and that her creditors were coming to collect her sons to be slaves.

He says, “Well, what do you have?”

She answers, “Nothing. I mean, I guess I have that small pot of oil.”

He tells her to gather up all of her neighbors’ extra pots and dump her oil in there.

Surely this was not the response she was expecting.

Dump out even the last thing you have.

But God works in unexpected ways sometimes. Her multiplied oil brought enough for her to sell and pay off the debt that was owed as well as provide an income for her family moving forward.

Elder Richard G. Scott said, “Find the compensatory blessings in your life when, in the wisdom of the Lord, He deprives you of something you very much want. To the sightless or hearing impaired, He sharpens the other senses.... With the loss of a dear one, He deepens the bonds of love, enriches memories, and kindles hope in a future reunion.”⁵

I know very well the temptation to reject the compensatory blessings that God sends.

The widow who received oil to provide for her family, I have to believe that she would have preferred to have her husband restored to her.

When I was in the hospital with Elsie, I wondered how I could ever feel safe in my home again? Our home has always been a sanctuary of joy and love and safety...and it now held the memories of the worst moments of my whole life.

And so, when my wonderful neighbors, friends and even strangers took that week we were in the hospital to remodel, repair, and replace things in our home so that we would feel loved-I had the temptation to say, "Actually, what I really want is my Elsie."

How silly it would have been for me to reject the overwhelming compensatory blessings bestowed upon me through the kindness of all those people that turned my home into a temple of service and love.

It would be easy to say, "My prayers for healing weren't answered. So, God doesn't answer my prayers."

But actually, sometimes the answer is no.

Occasionally, one of my children will ask me for a snack because they say they are hungry. But what they actually mean is, I saw the hidden stash of Oreos and I want them. So, when I offer them a banana or an apple as a solution to their hunger, it can seem to them like maybe that's not a great solution. They might even say that I am mean or selfish or unloving.

Sometimes we might feel the same way about God when our prayers are answered differently than the way we hope.

But we read in Matthew 7:9-11, "Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?"

So when we have prayed for the miracle of healing, and we receive instead the miracle of peace and comfort it can feel much like my Oreo deprived children.

Perhaps you find yourself feeling similarly about the Lord's version of an answer to your prayers that looks different from yours.

To you I would say, "Give the banana a try. It may be just what you didn't know you needed."

Since Elsie's passing, I can report that trials are still an active part of our lives. Some of my most painful battles have been fought since Elsie died-many of them too personal to share publicly.

But I believe that someday I will look back and feel truly grateful that I had someone so invested in our family's success helping us from the other side of the veil.

We Do Not Feel Worthy or Enough

This brings us to the next obstacle to feeling Gods love.

I hate that picture of me. I feel chubby and frumpy looking. But look how happy my girls are! I am learning that the ones that love me don't see chubby and frumpy. They see happy. They see enough.

With her permission, I share this story of a dear friend who owns a calligraphy print business. She creates beautiful prints of meaningful quotes and uplifting messages.

Recently I asked her to create for me a set of prints for an Easter event I was hosting. I gave her a vague explanation of what I was hoping for, but really, I wasn't even sure what I was hoping for (*picture not available*).

I wanted a set of three simple prints, that would say, Gethsemane, Golgotha, and Garden Tomb.

I know several graphic designers, but I specifically chose this friend because she has been battling cancer and I wanted to have a way to support her business.

Well, my friend took time studying and praying about this assignment. She sent me the first draft of what she had come up with along with lengthy descriptions of the symbolism behind each pen stroke and color choice.

They were beautiful.

But not quite was I was looking for.

I gave a few more vague instructions, and she went back to designing.

And then she sent me a simple graphic that said each of the words in a basic, almost childlike font. Each of the prints had a simple graphic above the word - an olive branch, a cross on a hill, and an open tomb.

When I saw it, my heart leapt and I said, "Yes! This is *exactly* what I was hoping for! I *love* it!"

It wasn't until later that she told me the miracle of this experience.

You see, what I didn't know was that my friend had been so weak and sick that she could barely hold a pen. She had been embarrassed to even send me what she had come up with. The rudimentary lines and rustic look of the font represented the best that she was capable of doing right now.

And so, the fact that it was exactly what I wanted became a testimony to her that our best is not only good enough, but it is exactly what the Lord wants - even when it doesn't seem good enough to us.

Sometimes we do not feel the Lord's love because we have fallen away from the covenant path, in which case the answer is to repent and return.

But often the reason we do not feel worthy of the Lord's love is simply our own insecurities about our inadequacies and weaknesses combined with whisperings of the adversary that we can never measure up.

I often still struggle with this.

Since Elsie died, I have battled voices in my head that tell me that I have failed society's lowest standard for mothers: Just keep the kids alive.

When my home gets messy, I think about those dishes in the sink the day of Elsie's accident and hear voices that say, "If you had kept your house cleaner, Elsie wouldn't have had that accident."

When my children get injured or sick, those voices say, "You can't keep them safe."

When I gain weight those voices say, "See? You can't even take care of yourself. Why would you be able to take care of anyone else?"

But there always seems to be another voice that whispers, "You are enough because you are mine."

The parable of the shepherd that leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the one that was lost always felt like kind of a bummer to me. As a general rule, I like to find myself in the middle of the flock. I'm a rule follower by nature and I have never been very rebellious. So, it felt like maybe I didn't matter that much if I was one of the ninety-nine.

Until I found myself as the one.

Here, I now had a problem that was absolutely unfixable. My daughter was gone, and I could not bring her back. I felt lost and alone, ashamed and afraid.

It was in this place that I discovered His love for the one.

Because we are all the one.

Recently, I learned more about the love of the one. My daughter Ellie missed her 12:00 curfew and had let her phone die. I was left pacing on the floor, unsure where she was and unable to reach her.

12:00 became 12:15, became 12:30, became 12:45, and became 1:00.

Tick-tock. In the least dance-y way.

Was she okay? Was she stuck somewhere she shouldn't be and in a compromising situation? Was she in an accident? Was she in the hospital? Was she going to fall asleep at the wheel on the drive home?

I was spiraling into panic more and more with each passing minute.

I had a feeling of where she might be. So finally, at 1:30, I woke up another child to sleep near the baby, and I ran to my car to find my little lost sheep.

I finally understood the scripture Luke 5:4-6, “What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.”

The ninety-nine are beloved. They are also safe and comfortable.

But there is no one that is dispensable.

Ellie is irreplaceable.

So am I.

So are you.

Even when you do not feel worthy of it or feel like you are enough, God loves you. He knows your name. And He asks you to take His.

So how can we remember God’s love and successfully move past the obstacles to feeling it?

My 3 best tools are:

1. Scripture study.
2. Cleaving to covenants.
3. Gratitude.

Scripture study

Elder Robert D. Hales said, “...when we want to speak to God, we pray. And when we want Him to speak to us, we search the scriptures.”⁶

One of my favorite personal examples of prayer being answered through scripture was in 2008 when we had just moved back to Utah.

I grew up in Texas. Reno, however, went to high school here in Utah. He was a high school football standout, and then he played at BYU.

After we got married and moved back east for him to play for the Philadelphia Eagles, occasionally he would be recognized, but most often we enjoyed a little bit of anonymity.

So, when we very first moved back here to Utah, a well-meaning Bishop in our ward sought me out immediately after sacrament meeting of our first Sunday in attendance asking for Reno, who had stepped out into the hallway.

He said, “Sister Mahe! We have the best calling for your husband!” And then seeing I was somewhat unimpressed by that, he followed up with, “Don’t worry. We’ll find somewhere to stick you later.”

While it is a little embarrassing to admit, the pin to the balloon of my overinflated ego was a bit painful for me (*picture not available*).

I felt silly and small. I felt unimportant and forgotten. Like, “I used to be somebody! I trained for the Olympics, man!”

I thought to myself, “Is that just who I am forever now? Sister Reno Mahe’s Wife?” (You’ll be happy to know that I’ve since then embraced the title).

But at the time, it bothered me enough that I took it to prayer.

When I opened my scriptures, I turned to 1 Nephi 21:15-16. It says, “For can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee, O house of Israel. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.”

Yes, people will forget us, they may disappoint us or hurt us. But God will never forget us.

I know that we can feel God’s love for us through the scriptures. He sends us love notes every day. Will we read them?

Cleave to Covenants

I was blessed with a super surprise bonus baby who is 5 months old (*picture not available*). A few weeks ago, we noticed her flexing her stomach as if she wanted to sit up, so we started doing little ab workouts with her. She holds onto our fingers, and we gently lift her up and slowly roll her back down on her back making sure she doesn’t fall.

She is gaining strength and it is likely really difficult for her.

But who is actually doing most of the work?

It reminded me of this scripture, Matthew 11:29-30. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

We yoke ourselves to the Savior by making covenants and then cleaving to them by doing the things He asks us to do. This is what makes His burden light. He lets us carry enough to gain strength and it feels very difficult for us sometimes. He allows us to take part in the work of salvation, but the reality is that He is actually the one doing all the work. For me, cleaving to my covenants means holding my Savior's hands.

Gratitude

My best tool for feeling God's love is gratitude.

My dad has a phrase that my family has adopted as a family mantra, "I came with nothing and I've still got most of it."

Mosiah 2:21 says, "...I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants."

This might seem counterintuitive, but I have come to notice that *even our trials come from our blessings*.

This was taken the year Reno retired from playing professional football in 2008 (*picture not available*). We quickly bought a beautiful home near market peak right before the housing market crashed. Within weeks we lost every dollar we had invested and found ourselves upside down in our new home. We lived for about a year on savings, about a year on credit, and somehow continued scraping by as Reno learned about business and became an entrepreneur. It was a steep learning curve. Amidst the financial struggles, we were also unknowingly involved in a close friend's illegal activities and Reno was very publicly charged with a crime he did not commit. It was a season of loss-loss of income, loss of reputation and friendships, loss of our family Suburban...

But each of those losses can be attributed to previous blessings.

We lost all of our money...but Reno played in the NFL! We had money to lose!

We lost our good name and reputation...but enough people knew about us to care! Reno adopted a motto, "Whether they're talking good or bad about you...at least they're talking about you!"

A few years later, when we lost our daughter...well, we have a daughter! So many yearn for that blessing.

When we focus on gratitude for the blessings we have received and notice the compensatory blessings for the ones we feel we have been denied, we push away bitterness and are able to feel joy in spite of our sorrows.

You see, there is nothing that we can teach the Savior about suffering or unfairness. He may take our financial security. He may take our reputation. He may take our family car. He may take our beloved family members.

But in return, if we are faithful, we are promised all that the Father has.

In return, He raises our daughters from the dead (*picture not available*).

Sisters, it is my hope that you will be filled with God's love for you. I hope that you will discover all of the creative ways that He finds to show His love to you.

I'd like to close with the lyrics to a well-known hymn.

“God loved us, so He sent His Son
Christ Jesus, the atoning One
To show us by the path He trod
The one and only way to God

Oh, love effulgent, love divine!
What debt of gratitude is mine,
That in his off'ring I have part
And hold a place within his heart.”⁷

We hold a place within His heart.

That is my testimony, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ Thomas S. Monson, “We Never Walk Alone,” October 2013.

² D. Todd Christofferson, “Our Relationship with God,” April 2022.

³ Neal A. Maxwell, “Lest Ye Be Wearied and Faint in Your Minds,” May 1991.

⁴ Spencer W. Kimball, “Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball,” 2006.

⁵ Richard G. Scott, “Finding Joy in Life,” April 1996.

⁶ Robert D. Hales, “Holy Scriptures: The Power of God unto Our Salvation,” October 2006.

⁷ Hymn #187.