

For God So Loved You

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How many of you recall seeing the great Arch of the Milky Way span the sky over your head, along with millions of other stars that cover the dome of the heavens?

Because I live in a city, one of the things that I forget is the glory of that night sky stretching from one horizon to the other. Prior to the industrialization of society, a view of the night sky filled with stars would have been common. It is breathtaking to realize that the stars seen from Earth are only a few of the stars in our Milky Way Galaxy, which is estimated to contain on the order of 300 billion stars.

Sometime back our friends who have a cabin in the San Juan Mountains of southern Colorado invited us to a star party in which a group gathered with telescopes far from city lights to view interesting features such as planets in our own solar system and nebulae in our galaxy, as well as the Andromeda Galaxy, our nearest galactic neighbor. The telescopes ranged in size from small refracting telescopes on tripods to large reflecting telescopes that required a ladder to get to the eyepiece. As

powerful as these amateur telescopes were, astronomy research requires much more powerful instruments.

One of those powerful instruments is the Hubble Space Telescope, built in 1990. It orbits about 350 miles above the earth, far above the interference of the atmosphere. Hubble's mirror is 2.4 meters in diameter, and the entire telescope weighs more than ten tons. Since its launch it has made more than one million observations, resulting in more than 100 terabytes of data. Astronomers from all over the world use the Hubble in their research. Many of you have likely seen images from the Hubble.

Even amateur telescopes can capture a detailed view of Saturn, but the Hubble Telescope is able to catch colorful views of Saturn in wavelengths not visible to the human eye. Saturn is, in my view, the most beautiful planet in our solar system, and it

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lies only about 1.1 light-hours from Earth at its nearest approach.

Although viewing the planets of our own solar system has yielded spectacular results, the Hubble isn't limited to close-range objects.

Looking beyond our solar system, the Hubble Telescope has captured images of the Ring Nebula, located about 2,000 light-years from Earth, that shows the varying colors of each ring of debris from the supernova that created the nebula thousands of years ago. C. Robert O'Dell noted that

the nebula is not like a bagel, but rather, it's like a jelly doughnut, because it's filled with material in the middle. . . . With Hubble's detail, we see a completely different shape than what's been thought about historically for this classic nebula. The new Hubble observations show the nebula in much clearer detail, and we see things are not as simple as we previously thought. [Quoted in "Hubble Reveals the Ring Nebula's True Shape," NASA, 23 May 2013, nasa.gov/mission_pages/hubble/science/ring-nebula.html#.]

The Hubble Telescope has also captured images of the Pinwheel Galaxy, which is twenty-one million light-years from us. It is estimated that this galaxy contains hundreds of billions of stars. It is larger than our own galaxy, which has 300 billion stars, but it is shaped similarly to our own galaxy. What must it be like to be able to perceive the slow spin of this galaxy and the interactions of all of its stars?

Pointed at what appeared to be a minuscule, vacant region of the sky and taking multiple exposures adding up to 560 hours, the Hubble Telescope has captured 5,500 galaxies at a distance of as much as 13.2 billion light-years. The faintest galaxies in the image are one ten-billionth the brightness of what the human eye can see. If we assume that this is the same type of image we would see if we were able to view the universe from any direction, the number of

galaxies that there are and the number of stars in those galaxies is overwhelming.

I feel very, very small.

Moses's Vision of the Works of God

Moses, whose record of his vision of God's creations is in the Pearl of Great Price, felt the same way. He said, "Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed" (Moses 1:10). How is it that a planet as small as ours, orbiting a single star out of billions among galaxies that seem endless, can attract the attention of the Creator? Continuing in Moses's vision, Father in Heaven revealed:

And worlds without number have I created; and I also created them for mine own purpose; and by the Son I created them, which is mine Only Begotten. . . .

And as one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof even so shall another come; and there is no end to my works, neither to my words. [Moses 1:33, 38]

Father in Heaven then revealed why He attends to our small planet and its population: "For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). Or, if I might be permitted to paraphrase, "For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass your immortality and eternal life."

Our Father in Heaven's work is individual salvation and individual happiness for eternity. We aren't specks in the universal expanse of God's creations but individuals loved and cherished by God. Whereas we use huge telescopes to see the expanse of God's creations, it is as though our Father in Heaven uses a huge microscope so that He can see each of us individually and be with us.

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf made similar observations in the October 2011 general conference:

But even though man is nothing, it fills me with wonder and awe to think that “the worth of souls is great in the sight of God.”

And while we may look at the vast expanse of the universe and say, “What is man in comparison to the glory of creation?” God Himself said we are the reason He created the universe! His work and glory—the purpose for this magnificent universe—is to save and exalt mankind. In other words, the vast expanse of eternity, the glories and mysteries of infinite space and time are all built for the benefit of ordinary mortals like you and me. Our Heavenly Father created the universe that we might reach our potential as His sons and daughters.

*This is a paradox of man: compared to God, man is nothing; yet we are everything to God. While against the backdrop of infinite creation we may appear to be nothing, we have a spark of eternal fire burning within our breast. We have the incomprehensible promise of exaltation—worlds without end—within our grasp. And it is God’s great desire to help us reach it. [“You Matter to Him,” *Ensign*, November 2011]*

Individual Love

If there is anything I can do from this podium today, it is to share with you the love that God and His Son have for us and the personal attention They give each of us. At the risk of starting with the trivial, I’d like to share an example from my own life that shows how our Father in Heaven cares for even the smallest problems in our lives.

As was said in the introduction, I have a PhD in computer science. What was not mentioned is that my PhD was awarded this year in April’s graduation. Nine years ago, as I was attending the general priesthood session of general conference, I was struck with a strong prompting to get a PhD in computer science. My initial reaction was mixed: I love learning, but the work that a PhD requires is enormous. Soon after I started my PhD I was called as a bishop in a BYU singles ward, which on the surface seemed to make the task even more difficult.

An experience that showed Heavenly Father’s individual love for me during my PhD program was that I found I got more accomplished when I was a father and a bishop, working a full-time job, moving toward tenure as a member of the library faculty, and beginning a PhD program. After my release as a bishop, I commented to my wife that I wished they would call me as a bishop again so that I could move through my PhD program more quickly; it seemed I had more difficulties making progress.

Another example deals with personal revelation. During my doctoral course work there was a significant concept that I could not wrap my mind around. Needless to say, this was frustrating, and it made me question my participation in the PhD program altogether. One night after my family had gone to bed, and after having spent the better part of the day trying to internalize the concept, I turned in frustration to my Father in Heaven. My prayer to Him was simply that I had tried to understand but had failed. If He didn’t directly help me, I would not succeed. I turned the problem over to Him. Within ten minutes of offering that prayer, my understanding was opened and I was able to proceed.

I marveled at this. Why should the Creator of heaven and earth care about what is essentially a trivial problem compared to the troubles of the world and the scope of all of His creations? Aren’t there more desperate prayers to be answered?

I was taught by this—and have remembered since—that my Heavenly Father cares about what I care about in righteousness. Even though my problem was minuscule, He intervened and moved me forward because it was important to me.

My Brother in Vietnam

Another experience I would like to share concerns my brother when he served in the United States Army in Vietnam forty-five years ago.

Regarding current relations among Vietnam, the United States, and the Church, I read recently that the Vietnamese government recognized three Vietnamese members of the Church as the Interim Representative Committee of the Church in Vietnam. There are currently more than 1,600 members of the Church in Vietnam, according to the Church's press release.

It is wonderful that peace and cooperation have replaced hostility between our two countries, leading to this first step in the recognition of the Church in their good country. Clearly the Spirit of the Lord has brought peace.

However, returning to the events of forty-five years ago, in which hostilities were fierce, my brother enlisted in the army, preferring to be a medical evacuation pilot rather than an attack helicopter pilot. Although the casualty rate for medical evacuation personnel was quite high, he chose this way to serve his country. Of the thirteen pilots who graduated with him in medical evacuation pilot training, only six returned, and of those six, only three were unharmed.

Although everyone who served in that theater of conflict was in harm's way, my brother recounts one particular day when the hand of Heavenly Father, through our grandmother, preserved his life. Some years prior to these events our maternal grandmother, whom my brother had been very close to, passed away.

On this particular day my brother and his medical evacuation team were called to the front lines to evacuate wounded soldiers during a battle. As was their practice, they circled a short distance from the battlefield until it was possible to land under the cover of fire from attack helicopters. Landing, receiving the wounded, and taking off again placed them in great danger since they had to hover in a single place as they landed, making them an easy target. On this particular day they had already made one run to the battle location. The

commanding officer then asked my brother and his team to return to the same battle site to recover additional severely wounded soldiers. The fighting was intense, and my brother recalls the fear that was in everyone's hearts. They successfully retrieved the wounded despite the heavy fighting.

My brother said that after he landed back at the military base, he could barely walk, and he sat at the edge of the helicopter's cockpit door shaking. He said that he had never felt our grandmother's presence so strongly, providing him with protection, as he did at that time. Later he was told that on his way out of the combat zone he had unknowingly flown over a camouflaged anti-aircraft installation. Why they did not fire on him he does not know.

When I was talking to my brother about this experience, he said to me that he knows that Heavenly Father knows his name, who he is, and what he needs. He knows this as surely as the sun rises each morning.

Mom and My Brother

My parents were justifiably concerned for my brother's safety. My mother once told me of a night when she was crying out of concern for my brother's safety. Without warning, the room filled with light, as though there had been a lightning bolt outside, and she felt the presence of her mother. She heard her mother's voice say, "Anne, Richard will be okay. You don't need to worry."

This promise was fulfilled not only in the event I have just related but also in my brother's entire tour of service in the military. I have wondered if my brother's experience in Vietnam and my mother's prayer occurred near the same time, but I have no way of knowing that.

From these two experiences I have learned that our loved ones who have passed on can, under the guidance of our Father in Heaven, be actively involved in our lives on earth.

“In Quiet Desperation”

The last example I would like to share with you is from the book *In Quiet Desperation: Understanding the Challenge of Same-Gender Attraction* by Fred Matis, Marilyn Matis, and Ty Mansfield (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004). Ty Mansfield is associated with North Star International (NorthStarLDS.org). North Star, not formally associated with nor supported by the Church, provides help and support to individuals struggling with same-gender attraction within the context of the teachings of the Church and the gospel.

I became aware of this organization when, as a bishop helping ward members with same-gender attraction, I needed to open my mind to and my understanding of this very difficult circumstance and the pain that ward members were experiencing. *In Quiet Desperation* shares experiences of individuals struggling with same-gender attraction.

One of the accounts relates:

I have to believe that our Father in Heaven, as a literal Parent, loves me personally, is interested in my life and progress, and is willing to bestow upon me whatever blessing I truly need and am open to receive. President Brigham Young said poignantly, “If you do not believe [that God is your Heavenly Father], cease to call him Father; and when you pray, pray to some other character.” [Matis, Matis, and Mansfield, 87–88; quoting JD 4:216]

Indeed, if we don’t believe that Heavenly Father is our Father, then why do we address Him as such?

The book also contains an analogy of the story of the Israelites fleeing Egypt only to encounter the impassable Red Sea. At this point many of the Israelites wanted to return to Egypt and to slavery rather than have faith in their God and His prophet:

When my back was against the sea and my feet were pointing toward Egypt, I have felt the delivering

*power of my Redeemer—I have seen “the salvation of the Lord” through sacred personal experiences. During the period of my greatest struggle, all I knew to do was continue doing that which I knew how to do: to study His word and pray for understanding. As I have left my heart open—even in my times of doubt and fear—to potentially feeling the comfort and instruction of the Spirit, He has helped me, through personal spiritual experiences, to internalize for the first time in my life certain principles I had always believed or already “known.” As I felt the power and grace of Christ actively working in me, I felt the glimmer of hope and the fire of faith begin again to grow brighter in my heart. My barriers of doubt and faithlessness were being parted, and I was given the strength and desire to continue forward once again. [In Matis, Matis, and Mansfield, *In Quiet Desperation*, 81]*

I don’t know why we suffer with challenges such as same-gender attraction, alcoholism, and addictions, other than that we live in a fallen world that is subject to the temptations of Satan and the corruptibility of mortality, and that brings forth thorns and thistles to afflict us. However, I know that we are also subject to the love of our Heavenly Father as we struggle with our individual problems. Sacred personal experiences break through the darkness of this terrestrial world and show us the way.

Remember What You Know

I have recounted instances in which our Father in Heaven has directly intervened in individuals’ lives, from tender mercies to life-altering experiences. One of the dangers in this life is forgetting what you already know and have experienced. Remember what Father in Heaven has already done for you. Refresh your memories and seek new spiritual experiences; it is all too easy to forget and to deceive yourself. These tender mercies and life-altering experiences are there to give you hope, faith, and understanding. Remember that your Father in Heaven has already shown His love

for you, and just because an answer may be no or, more frustrating, there is no response, that does not mean that He does not love you.

Forgetting Former Help

The scriptures are full of examples of people who forgot how their Father in Heaven had helped them. In the journey to the promised land, Laman and Lemuel turned on their brother Nephi, only to be stopped by an angel. Within a few verses they were complaining again, as though the angel had never been there at all. The whole Book of Mormon seems to be one cycle of people being helped by God, forgetting that they had been helped, remembering and repenting, and then being helped again. One thing to be learned from the Book of Mormon is to not repeat this cycle in your own lives.

Returning to the analogy of the children of Israel at the shores of the Red Sea, the account from *In Quiet Desperation* reads:

*I understood in a personal way the feelings I believe the children of Israel must have felt as they faced the wall of water that caused them to fear and doubt their course as they watched the pursuing Egyptians. As I sometimes have, they forgot the earlier miracles and their earlier illumination. “When Pharaoh drew nigh, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians marched after them; and they were sore afraid” (Exodus 14:10). Elder Jeffrey R. Holland commented on those verses: “Some . . . said words to this effect: ‘Let’s go back. This isn’t worth it. We must have been wrong. That probably wasn’t the right spirit telling us to leave Egypt.’” [Matis, Matis, and Mansfield, 80; quoting Holland, “Cast Not Away Therefore Your Confidence,” *Ensign*, March 2000]*

The children of Israel forgot what they had already experienced and known, and they preferred the slavery in Egypt to the freedom of following the Lord. Remembering all of the interactions our Heavenly Father has had with

us should illuminate our current decisions and paths.

In the New Testament the apostle Peter wrote of attributes of righteousness, such as faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity. He then continued:

For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. [2 Peter 1:8–9]

Peter admonished us that when we live by righteous principles, we are fruitful in the knowledge of our Savior. But unrighteousness makes us blind and makes us forget how our Savior has blessed us. Forgetting is like saying that these experiences never occurred and that we don’t value them. Forgetting may lead us to make decisions as though our Father in Heaven has never influenced our lives at all.

Lost and Found

A painting by Greg Olsen titled *Lost and Found* is one of my favorites (see gregolsen.com/artwork/christian-art/lost-and-found). In this painting the Savior is giving a young man His complete attention. His body is leaning forward and He is listening intently.

Who is the young man? With his backpack, he seems to be on a journey; but he is alone, except the Savior has found him. What is the young man looking for? There is a path leading from the forest. Is this the path that led him to the bench where the Savior was waiting for him?

This painting is particularly important to some friends of ours. One of their children had left the family, and they did not know where this child had gone. There was nothing they could do to help since there was no contact and

they had no notion of where to find their child. This picture was important to them because they could do nothing to help. All they could hope for was that the Savior, or someone feeling the Savior's influence, was there to help their child.

This image says more to me. It also says that it may be one of us who is sent to help through Christ's help and inspiration. On more than one occasion as a bishop I recall being stopped in my tracks and told to visit a member of my ward. On many of those occasions the visit was well timed to provide help to a ward member. This built my testimony of the Lord's love for my ward members, as the Lord sent me when and where I was needed.

Last week, in my ward's sacrament meeting, one of the youth speakers, Nicole Tirrell, noted that the phone number we call for help is 911 but that we should think of the number 991 to give help—recalling the Savior's parable of the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine to find the one (see Matthew 18:12–13 and Luke 15:4–6).

Brothers and sisters, I have shared with you examples of our Heavenly Father reaching out. We should seek out and identify those experiences in our lives that demonstrate God's love for us and His attention to our needs and our lives. We should remember them and let them encourage and strengthen us.

Remember:

- Seek your Father in Heaven's help.
- Remember everything that your Father in Heaven has done for you personally.
- Use those memories to sustain you throughout your trials.
- Be the one who is listening and helping.

To paraphrase John 3:16, always remember that God so loved you that He gave His Only Begotten Son and that if you should believe on Him you should not perish but have eternal life. I leave these things with you in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.