

The Worth of a Soul

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Tuesday, June 24, 2014

On the morning of October 14, 1987, in Midland, Texas, a little 18-month-old girl named Jessica McClure fell through the 8-inch-wide opening of an abandoned well while playing in the backyard of her aunt's home. After dropping about 22 feet into the well, the child became stuck. Jessica's mother, Cissy McClure, had stepped away to answer the phone when she heard the other children in the yard screaming. With her mother's panicked call to the police, there began what would become a massive rescue effort to save Baby Jessica, as she became known. The painfully slow and difficult process lasted two and a half days with crews of rescue workers, mining experts, and local volunteers laboring around the clock to drill a shaft parallel to the one in which Baby Jessica was trapped. Then they tunneled horizontally through dense rock to connect the two shafts. Early on, a microphone was lowered into the well to keep tabs on the toddler. Workers called words of encouragement to her, and throughout the ordeal she could be heard crying, humming, and singing "Winnie-the-Pooh."

Millions around the world were glued to their televisions and praying for Baby Jessica's safety. I was one of them, sitting beside my three-year-old son, sensing how I would feel if it were he in the well. Finally, on the night of October 16, a bandaged and dirt-covered but

alert Baby Jessica was safely pulled out of the well by paramedics. After her rescue, Jessica was hospitalized for more than a month and lost a toe to gangrene.

Once out of the hospital, she went on to lead a normal life, spent largely out of the public eye. She graduated from high school in 2004, married two years later, and is now a contented stay-at-home mother of two, interestingly with no memory of those 58 hours trapped in a well.¹

I think about how Baby Jessica's plight captured the attention and prayers of so many people. We all desperately wanted her to survive. She and her family were unknown to all but a handful of those following their terrible ordeal, but we all felt love and concern for the little girl; we all sensed the worth of a soul.

In the very first chapter of scripture we read: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."² We sometimes use this statement as evidence of the corporeal nature of God—that He has a physical body after which our own physical bodies were fashioned. While this is true, I believe the scripture has an added meaning—that we are not just another species in nature, but that we

are partakers of the divine nature. God says both male and female are created in His image, meaning His nature, His character, His attributes are in us, not fully developed to be sure—far from it—but nevertheless we are of Him. The universe and all forms of life in it are God’s creation, including mankind, but we are something more. Men and women are also the race of God with all the possibilities that that implies.

God, our Father, therefore is not indifferent to our existence or our fate. For Him, we have infinite value. Remember, it is His work and glory “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.”³

President Thomas S. Monson relates an experience from early in his ministry that sheds light on the worth of souls:

Some years ago, at a priesthood leadership session of the Monument Park West Stake conference, [Doctrine and Covenants 18:10] became the theme for the visitor from the Welfare Committee, my former stake president, Paul C. Child. In his accustomed style, Brother Child left the stand and began to walk down the aisle among the assembled priesthood brethren. He quoted the verse, “Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God.” Then he asked the question, “Who can tell me the worth of a human soul?”

Every man in attendance began to think of an answer in the event Brother Child were to call on him. I had grown up under his leadership, and I knew he would never call on a high councilor or member of a bishopric; rather he would select one

who would least expect to be called. Sure enough, he called from a list he carried the name of an elders quorum president. Thunderstruck, the brother stammered as he asked, “Would you repeat the question, please?” The question was repeated, followed by an even longer pause. Suddenly the response came forth, “The worth of a human soul is its capacity to become as God.”

Brother Child closed his scripture, walked back to the pulpit, and, while passing me, whispered, “A profound reply; a profound reply.”

With this perspective firmly in our minds, we are prepared to serve in the great mission of bringing souls unto Him.⁴

The most poignant and powerful measure of our worth in God’s eyes is His willingness to offer His Only Begotten Son to redeem us. Jesus said to Nicodemus, “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. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”⁵

The Lord’s suffering in Gethsemane and on the cross to overcome the Fall and atone for individual sins was incomprehensibly severe. It caused him “to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that [He] might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink.”⁶ Nevertheless, because our souls are so precious and so inextricably linked to the glory of God, Jesus finished that bitter cup and redeemed us.⁷

If the worth of souls is great in the sight of God, it is trifling in the sight of Satan. He is bent on slowing, and if possible destroying the progress and happiness of any soul. We see it in the violence, abuse, and despair he inspires in individuals and in societies. His philosophy is degradation, his policy is domination, and his method is coercion. “He seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.”⁸

It is especially troubling when he can persuade someone that the worth of his or her soul is diminished or even destroyed by sin. The sins we commit, or the evil perpetrated against us has no effect upon our innate and inalienable worth. Yes, sin and evil must be addressed for a soul to flourish and realize its full, divine potential, but no one who has not committed the unpardonable sin should ever feel that repentance is futile, that some malignant sin has destroyed the value of his or her soul. That is not possible.

The Savior’s infinite Atonement brought about the gift of repentance. It is a marvelous gift that opens other gifts: forgiveness, healing, cleansing, happiness, holiness, and in the end, eternal life. And so, when He speaks of the great worth of souls, the Lord says to his missionaries:

For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might *repent* and come unto him.

And he hath risen again from the dead, that he might bring all men unto him, on conditions of *repentance*.

And how great is his joy in the soul that *repenteth!*

Wherefore, you are called to cry *repentance* unto this people.

And if it so be that you should labor all your days in crying *repentance* unto this people, and bring, save it be one soul unto me, how great shall be your joy with him in the kingdom of my Father! . . .

And as many as *repent* and are baptized in my name, which is Jesus Christ, and endure to the end, the same shall be saved.⁹

What does all this mean for missionaries?

First, it means that there is no greater work than the work you are doing. It is the work God has set for Himself—“to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.”¹⁰ To assist in the redemption of those who bear the image of God—His children—is a service that cultivates greatness in you. “He that is ordained of God and sent forth, the same is appointed to be the greatest, notwithstanding he is the least and the servant of all.”¹¹ This statement from the Doctrine and Covenants echoes Christ’s words to His ancient Apostles. The world’s concept of greatness consists in the number of people one can dominate or “exercise lordship over.”¹² “But,” said Jesus, “so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”¹³

How can one be both the greatest and the least at the same time? The Lord is saying that doing great work makes you great, but you do that work by making yourself the least, the

servant of all. Greatness comes as you forget yourself and lose yourself in the service of God.¹⁴ The Savior was the greatest because He served the most—literally everyone—in the most complete way as He descended below all things¹⁵ to redeem us from death and hell.

The greatness of your work as a missionary only expands as you help new and less-active members follow up their repentance and baptism with entry into the temple, where they will find access to eternal life.

Let it also be noted that you bring to the world, one person at a time, a message of hope that it desperately needs and that can come only through faith in God. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, has observed:

“The planets are not free in their movements. Chemical elements do not choose which way to combine. Genes do not make decisions. But we are free; we do choose; we do make decisions. . . . Moral laws are not scientific laws. They belong to a different world, the human world, the world of freedom, God’s most fraught and fateful gift.”¹⁶

“Because [we are free,] we can change ourselves, we can change the world. That is the religious basis of hope.”¹⁷

Cultures and societies that do not respect moral agency and the worth of the soul fail in the end. Returning to Rabbi Sacks’ statement:

“All end in tragedy because none attaches ultimate significance to the individual as individual. All end by sacrificing the individual, which is why, in the end, such cultures die. There is only one thing capable

of defeating tragedy, which is the belief in God who in love sets his image on the human person, thus endowing each of us with non-negotiable, unconditional dignity.”¹⁸

As missionaries, you proclaim the truth about God and the freedom, dignity, and destiny of souls, which is the only foundation on which individuals may live in hope and societies may flourish.

Second, understanding the worth of a soul, a missionary must act with full appreciation of the divine nature in everyone he or she meets. C. S. Lewis expressed the divine potential existing in each of us with this comment, “It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses. . . . There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.”¹⁹

Thus, to work with those who are potentially “heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ,”²⁰ a missionary’s motives must be pure. Specifically, a missionary must act in love. “Charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him. Wherefore. . . pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ.”²¹

Note that the “pure love of Christ,” charity, comes from God by prayer. It is a spiritual gift. You do not have to create it; you rather have to ask for it, but ask “with all the energy of heart.” Then, since you are a “true follower of His Son Jesus Christ,” the Father will bestow this love upon you through the Holy Ghost.

I experienced this myself years ago as a young bishop. We lived in a wonderful ward, but quite honestly, there were two or three members of the ward that, prior to my call, I avoided if I could. Let's just say they were not fun to be around. I found, however, that the mantle of bishop included a number of spiritual gifts and talents, and chief among them was the gift of charity. I began to see these individuals through the Lord's eyes. I began to appreciate the worth of their souls as understood by Him who had died to redeem them. I began to love them with the pure love of Christ. With that love came patience and understanding, and also the insights and courage needed to correct them "with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost." That gift also enabled me then to show forth "an increase of love" to them so that they saw me not as an enemy but as a true friend.²² That helped them feel faith in Jesus Christ and change in ways that would otherwise not have been possible. I think I changed too. Fortunately, the gift of charity stayed with me after my release as bishop, and we did not fall back to the old relationship, or I should say "non-relationship."

If you are filled with charity, those you teach and serve will feel it. They will not only respond to the love of Christ they feel through you, but many will also begin to gain a sense of their own infinite worth. They will not only see a new vision of who they are and what they may become, but they will also *feel* that they can attain it. As you teach "by the Spirit of truth" motivated by love, you and those you teach will "understand one another" and will be "edified and rejoice together."²³ In time, your love may become such that you cannot "bear that any human soul should perish."²⁴

Third and finally, on my list of the implications for missionaries of the worth of souls is a heightened awareness of your own potential and a deepened understanding of what it will take to realize that potential. Sisters, elders, you have embarked upon an experience that will both excite and humble you as never before. On the excitement side, you will sense the Savior through the Holy Spirit working in you. You will feel him magnify you; you will rejoice in moments when you see that you have been an instrument in His hand. You will realize that the Savior not only knows you, but that He *likes* you and that He is interested in what you do and what happens to you. You will sense His friendship and even His trust.

On the humility side, you will begin to understand that you are nothing in this work without Christ. You will truly understand what He meant when He said to His Apostles at the Last Supper:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.

Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. . . .

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.²⁵

If you are faithful, you will come to say with Ammon, “I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things.”²⁶

Over time, you will come to see yourself as you are seen and know yourself as you are known by the Savior. Up to now, you have seen yourself “through a glass darkly.”²⁷ In the next months and beyond, you will begin to grasp just how much you lack, how far you have to go to accomplish what God expects of you and what He expects you to become. That can be rather discouraging; believe me, I know. It may even bring some tears. But fortunately, with this revelation of the truth about you also comes an increased reassurance that you do not walk alone. The one who holds these high expectations, who is demanding so much of you, is the same one who has overcome the world,²⁸ who wants to help you and who *can* help you overcome whatever you must. Because you will be closer to the Lord than ever before, you will have confidence in the promise He gave: “My grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.”²⁹

We all have a friend in Nephi who at least once in his life, in a moment of anguish and depression, mournfully declared:

Notwithstanding the great goodness of the Lord, in showing me his great and marvelous works, my heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of my iniquities.

I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.

And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins.³⁰

But as your missionary service continues, you will, with growing confidence, also be able to say with Nephi, “Nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted. My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions. . . . He hath filled me with his love.”³¹

Just as you teach and offer redemption through the Lord’s Atonement, you must experience the same personally. When the Lord said, “How great is his joy in the soul that repenteth,”³² He was including you and me. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”³³

It was said of Nephi, the grandson of Helaman, that he taught with such power, the people could not disbelieve his words.³⁴ If you teach by the Spirit *and* your own experience with the Atonement, your message and testimony will also carry great convincing power. Whether or not people accept and act on your invitation, they will not be able to disbelieve the truth of your witness.

Your faith in God may only be matched by His faith in you. He has made you “a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned [you] with glory and honour.”³⁵ He has set you apart to stand as companions to the Apostles in fulfilling their great commission to “teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the

Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.³⁶ He has authorized you to teach and testify in the name of Jesus Christ. He has honored you with the privilege of bearing the kingdom of God in your hands as you offer to all the one path to salvation—faith in Christ, repentance, baptism, the gift of the Holy

Ghost, and enduring to the end. Honor His faith in you.

By the Holy Spirit, I bear witness of God the Father and of His Son Jesus Christ, the Redeemer. I testify that your soul is precious in the sight of God. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ “Baby Jessica rescued from a well as the world watches,” History, accessed June 23, 2014, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/baby-jessica-rescued-from-a-well-as-the-world-watches>. (See also “Baby Jessica at 25: Famous toddler in 1987 well rescue is now married – with two kids of her own,” UK Mail Online, accessed June 23, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2218731/Jessica-Morales-Famous-toddler-rescued-1987-married-children.html> and “The Epic Rescue of Jessica McClure,” People Magazine, accessed June 23, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2218731/Jessica-Morales-Famous-toddler-rescued-1987-married-children.html>.)

² Genesis 1:27.

³ Moses 1:39.

⁴ Thomas S. Monson, *A Prophet’s Voice, Messages from Thomas S. Monson*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 291–92.

⁵ John 3:16–17.

⁶ Doctrine and Covenants 19:18.

⁷ See Doctrine and Covenants 19:19.

⁸ 2 Nephi 2:27.

⁹ Doctrine and Covenants 18:11–15, 22; emphasis added.

¹⁰ Moses 1:39.

¹¹ Doctrine and Covenants 50:26.

¹² Mark 10:42.

¹³ Mark 10:43–45.

¹⁴ See Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24.

¹⁵ See Doctrine and Covenants 88:6.

¹⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2011), 71.

¹⁷ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2011), 38.

¹⁸ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2011), 38.

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, (Harper One, 2001), 45–46.

²⁰ Romans 8:17.

²¹ Moroni 7:47–48.

²² Doctrine and Covenants 121:43.

²³ See Doctrine and Covenants 50:21–22.

²⁴ Mosiah 28:3.

²⁵ John 15:1–2, 4–5.

²⁶ Alma 26:12.

²⁷ See 1 Corinthians 13:12.

²⁸ See John 16:33.

²⁹ Ether 12:27.

³⁰ 2 Nephi 4:17-19.

³¹ 2 Nephi 4:19–21.

³² Doctrine and Covenants 18:13.

³³ 1 John 1:8–9.

³⁴ See 3 Nephi 7:18.

³⁵ Psalms 8:5.

³⁶ Matthew 28:19; See also Doctrine and Covenants 112:28–29.