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Feeling the Atonement

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Feeling the Atonement

JEFFREY D. KEITH

My dear brothers and sisters, I am delighted to be here today to share a few thoughts with you. I appreciate the music that was so inspiring and the prayer to invoke the Lord's Spirit here today.

Three weeks ago today, President Bateman centered his devotional talk around a scripture counseling us to "search diligently in the light of Christ" and to "lay hold upon every good thing" (Moroni 7:19).

Now what constitutes searching diligently? Numerous studies have shown that the more you participate—actively participate—the more you learn. For example, I love to take my students on field trips because they become so thoroughly involved that they focus and learn. I have taken two groups of students to the most active volcano on earth to sample lava flows that are about 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. The students are in danger of receiving first-degree burns on their arms reaching down to get a lava sample with the pick end of their hammers. They smell the noxious sulfurous gases in the blue smoke coming out of the lava. They see the lava explode as it enters the ocean, and they see blocks of lava floating on the water as they boil the ocean. The soles of their boots may become very soft and begin to smoke if they walk too long on an active

flow. Will they ever forget the essential characteristics of an active lava flow that they have learned through using all five senses? Never! Any type of learning that requires your full, undivided attention and a complete, strenuous effort is going to be very effective.

Does the Lord ever require such strenuous effort for our learning, profit, and blessing? Isaiah recorded that "Hezekiah wept sore" (Isaiah 38:3). Jacob "wrestled" (Genesis 32:24). Melchizedek "offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save" (Hebrews 5:7; see also JST note). Enos wrestled and "cried unto [God] in mighty prayer" (Enos 1:2, 4). Now these are active learners! There is nothing more active and draining than wrestling or crying! But does all learning need to be so painful?

There is one movie that my children have watched enough to memorize every line—and probably a good portion of the student body here today has done the same. The movie is *The Princess Bride*. According to *The Princess Bride*, what is the greatest thing in the world next to a good MLT (mutton, lettuce, and

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tomato sandwich)? The obvious answer is true love. Love is the most enjoyable and desirable form of active learning ever devised by God or man. I would like to emphasize how much more effectively we can learn by feeling something in our hearts than by just being able to write an equation for it. Love is the highest form of active learning, and it is far superior to wrestling, crying, or having your boots catch fire while walking on lava.

If we were to identify one single item that would be of greatest value to search and find, what would that be? I suspect that many here today might say it would be to know more about the Savior. If we are enrolled in this pursuit, it is certainly not a one-hour course! How extensive are the readings for this class? The Apostle John told us:

And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. [John 21:25]

If such a biography were written, it would be an incomparable biography! By contrast, you just heard my biography—only a paragraph or two given as my introduction, and that is it. I think that even my mother would be hard-pressed to write a more glowing or complete biography than that one! But with our Savior, a world full of books is inadequate to describe His accomplishments.

How can we possibly comprehend such a biography and such a being? If the surface of the earth were covered with Harold B. Lee libraries, each containing four-and-a-half million volumes like ours, the thousand trillion—or quadrillion—biographical volumes that could be housed would be insufficient. What would be written in all of those biographical volumes? Well, “worlds without number” has He created (Moses 1:33; see also John 1:3). Therefore, the creation of worlds may be a

significant portion of this library but not the most important part. Perhaps the greatest work among His endless works is the infinite Atonement. After all, what is His work and His glory? See Moses 1:39. Whom does He agonize over? See Luke 22:44 and 3 Nephi 17:14. For whom has He suffered? See D&C 19:16. Yes, as Elder Maxwell notes, He is “in the details of our own lives” (Neal A. Maxwell, “Becoming a Disciple,” *Ensign*, June 1996, 17). He has experienced all our “aching griefs” and, most important, paid a price we cannot fathom for our personal sins (Neal A. Maxwell, “Plow in Hope,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 60). Each of us has a unique place in His biography.

Is this biography simply hypothetical? Perhaps not, because we are told that “all things are written by the Father” (3 Nephi 27:26).

Now this infinite biography is not just a tragedy. The Lord is equally well acquainted with our accomplishments, because, as John also recorded, He is “the vine,” and we “are the branches” (John 15:5). All the good nourishing influences that come into our lives come through Him. Without Him, we could do nothing. “For in him we live, and move, and have our being; . . . For we are also his offspring” (Acts 17:28). So, you see, the most complete biographies of each of our lives—both the growth and the pruning back—are really contained in His biography. And thanks be to God that this is the case!

The question remains: How can we possibly know all that is written in those quadrillion-plus volumes? Even if we search the scriptures diligently—for “they are they which testify of” him (John 5:39)—our knowledge may still be trivial when compared to His endless works (see Moses 1:33; John 1:3). But as we search diligently, the Lord can help to close that gap in vital areas. Here is the key: Our minds can’t comprehend some things, *but our hearts can!* There is so much that the Lord can reveal to our hearts. It is that knowledge that is revealed to our hearts as well as

to our minds that is vital. And it is by the power of His Spirit that He wants to write it in every heart (see Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10).

For example, as He revealed to Nephi with the vision of the tree of life, we can *know* and *feel* the love that He has for His children (see 1 Nephi 11:17–23). If we just know it but don't feel it, we are missing the boat. This is the fruit that is most desirable above all other fruits, and it is shed into the hearts of His children (see Romans 5:5). Then, if it grows in our hearts, we become Saints or, in other words, His sons and daughters.

For example, there are some biographies of Saints that we cannot hear recounted without *feeling* the love of the Savior—His love for them as well as for us. Let me tell you such a story, just a page from our Lord's biography—a page that spans a few generations and affects every one of us here today.

The story begins with Joseph Knight, who befriended Joseph Smith early in the history of the Restoration. He supplied Joseph Smith with many of the necessities of life while he was translating the Book of Mormon. In fact, he loaned his horse and wagon to Joseph Smith to recover the plates from the Hill Cumorah and then supplied some of the paper on which the translation was made. He often visited Joseph to make sure that he had adequate food to continue the work of translation. He was always giving and expecting nothing in return. (See Dean Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 [Autumn 1976]: 29–39.)

Newell Knight, Joseph's son, was equally faithful. Newell was the recipient of the first miracle in the Church and labored as a missionary with Orson Pratt and Hyrum Smith. In 1835, while working on the Kirtland Temple, Newell met and married Lydia Goldthwaite. Lydia had been baptized two years earlier after hearing the Prophet speak in Mount Pleasant, Canada. (See Jesse William Knight, *The Jesse Knight Family: Jesse Knight, His Forebears and*

Family [Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1940], 9–15.)

After her baptism in Canada, Lydia had been extremely anxious to gather with the Saints in Kirtland. Her parents, although not members, finally gave Lydia "ample means" to move to Kirtland and to "be comfortable and respectable" (*Jesse Knight Family*, 14). As soon as Lydia arrived in Kirtland, she was approached by Vincent Knight, who exclaimed:

"Sister, the Prophet is in bondage and has been brought into distress by the persecutions of the wicked, and if you have any means to give, it will be a benefit to him." "Oh yes, sir," she replied, "here is all I have. I only wish it were more," emptying her purse containing perhaps fifty dollars, in his hand as she spoke. [In Jesse Knight Family, 14]

The amount was just enough to free the Prophet Joseph Smith. Lydia apparently didn't worry that she was then left with nothing on her first day in Kirtland.

After several months Lydia met Newell, and they were married. They moved with many of the Saints to Missouri and then back to Nauvoo. As the Saints left Nauvoo, Newell was appointed by Brigham Young to lead the first company of 50. The following year, as the Saints were settled in log cabins on the prairie, Lydia recorded:

"On Monday morning, January 4th, 1847, Newell, whose health had been failing, said, 'Lydia, I believe I shall go to rest this winter.' The next night he awoke with a severe pain in his right side; a fever had set in, and in spite of all that loving hands could do, he grew worse. "I felt at last that I could not endure his sufferings any longer and that I ought not to hold him here. I knelt by his bedside and with my hands upon his pale forehead, asked my Heavenly Father to forgive my sins; and that the suffering of my companion might cease, and if he was appointed unto death, and could not remain with us that he might be quickly eased from pain

and fall asleep in peace.” Almost immediately, all pain left him and in a short time he sweetly fell asleep in death without a struggle or a groan.
[In *Jesse Knight Family*, 17–18]

Lydia was now left alone to care for seven children, and an eighth would be born a few months later. Her grandson J. William recorded that Lydia’s “heart cried out in sorrow many times, for her burden seemed more than she could bear” (*Jesse Knight Family*, 21). Lydia could not then go west with the first company of Saints. Later that year President Brigham Young asked Lydia to give her three yoke of oxen and two wagons to another family who wanted to go west and “who could go and take care of themselves when they got there” (*Jesse Knight Family*, 21). So she gave up her wagons and oxen and stayed at Winter Quarters or nearby settlements until the summer of 1850. She then rented a yoke of oxen for \$60 to move her family west and spent the next two years in the Salt Lake Valley working to repay the \$60 debt. (See *Jesse Knight Family*, 21–23.)

Lydia always remained faithful, but one of her sons, Jesse, not only grew up inactive in the Church but would argue against the Church with his mother. J. William Knight recorded that on his grandmother’s last visit to the Knight home before her death, his father Jesse said:

“Mother, how is it you are not preaching to me as you usually do?” She answered, “Jesse, I have prayed in the Temple for my children many times and on one occasion the Lord made known to me that I was not to worry about you any more, that you would one day understand for yourself.” Father then said to her, “Mother, I know you must be mistaken, for I’m further from the Church now than I have ever been before.” She replied, “I don’t care what you say, I know you will one day see the Gospel for yourself, and I never intend to argue again with you about religion.” [*Jesse Knight Family*, 33]

Jesse’s mother then returned to St. George and her temple work. On the day that she completed the temple work for the last family name that she had, she went to bed and quietly passed away to go meet Newel and “that God who gave [her] life” (see *Jesse Knight Family*, 24; Alma 40:11).

A few years later Jesse’s family was afflicted with sickness. His youngest child, about two years old, was the first to become sick. J. William stated that Jennie “was the idol of the whole family” (*Jesse Knight Family*, 34). When the doctors declared that nothing more could be done to save her, Jesse’s wife insisted that they call the elders to administer to the child. However, Jesse stated: “No, it would be hypocritical, now that the doctors have given her up, for me to resort to such a thing.” “And besides,” he said, “I have no faith in the Church” (in *Jesse Knight Family*, 34).

Jesse’s wife prevailed, and the elders were called. They administered to the unconscious two-year-old. As soon as they finished, Jennie immediately regained consciousness, sat up, and noticed the flowers in the window. Jesse’s son J. William wrote, “From that very moment, my father’s life was changed” and he “remembered the words of his mother” (*Jesse Knight Family*, 34). Jesse himself noted:

Soon after the miraculous healing of Jennie, our oldest girl, Minnie, was stricken. . . . From the time she was taken ill, Minnie felt that she would not recover. When asked why she felt so, she answered that when Jennie was so bad she had asked God to take her if she would do as well as Jennie; so she counted the days, believing she would live but thirty days from the time she took sick.

Every day she kept the count, and departed as she had said. Her going was peaceful, her breath leaving her as she said the prayer, “Oh God, bless our household.” I remembered now that when she was a baby she had diphtheria, and that then, almost seventeen years ago, I had promised the Lord that if he would spare her life I would not forget Him.

I had not kept that promise. How keenly I felt the justice of her being taken from us! I suffered in my feelings. I prayed for forgiveness and help. My prayer was answered and I received a testimony. [Jesse Knight Family, 35–36; original spelling]

In the late 1800s, the Tintic mining district near the southern end of Utah County was one of the more important mining districts in the western United States. Jesse had no real training in how to find an ore deposit, but he enjoyed prospecting anyway and did prospect for seven years in this district before he found anything of real worth. It is that discovery that was most remarkable and unexpected—at least by some.

This is the week in my Geology 460 course that we generally discuss how ore deposits such as those in the Tintic Mountains are formed and what the best indicators are for evaluating the possible proximity of a large ore deposit. These guides to finding an ore deposit are particularly well known for the East Tintic mining district because in the mid-1900s the United States Geological Survey spent 25 years working in the district to develop the exploration guides. To teach this part of the course, I take my students on a field trip to the area and show them the different types and combinations of hydrothermal alteration that are often indicative of a concealed ore deposit. Then I take them to the east side of Godiva Mountain, where the rocks are really quite unremarkable. I wish I could take all of you to this locality.

Well, let us imagine that we are on the east side of Godiva Mountain in southern Utah County. Our story resumes with Jesse sitting down somewhere around here to rest under a pine tree. Suddenly, to his surprise, “he heard a voice distinctly say to him, ‘This country is here for the Mormons’” (in *Jesse Knight Family*, 37). That was all. He assumed that was a good indication regarding the area where he was prospecting, so he continued

looking. Jesse brought Jared Roundy, who he considered to be an expert miner, to come and evaluate the likelihood of there being ore concealed at depth on the site. He asked Mr. Roundy if he would like to be a partner in staking a claim on this site. Mr. Roundy declared that this area was a “darned” old humbug and that he wanted no part of it. Jesse was not deterred and staked his claim on this piece of ground that day, calling it the Humbug claim. (See Knight, *The Jesse Knight Family*, 37–38.)

Jesse eventually began driving a tunnel to look for ore. There are piles of waste rock from the Humbug tunnels, and initially that is all there was—just waste rock. There was no ore to justify all of his effort. In fact, there were no other productive mines on this side of the mountain. But he was confident that ore would be found, so he hired the two very best miners that were working in the adjacent Tintic district and talked his son J. William into coming to work for him as well. Those three worked in eight-hour shifts, and Jesse’s job was to wheel the broken rock out of the tunnel in a wheelbarrow. Driving a tunnel using just a single jackhammer and a wheelbarrow is extremely slow and difficult work. The four of them did this for almost two months, finding nothing except extremely boring and unremarkable limestone. (See *Jesse Knight Family*, 40.)

I agree with Jared Roundy: looking at this rock from a geologic point of view, there is no reason to anticipate finding anything of worth in the vicinity. Jesse must have had a lot of faith to continue this pursuit day after day! J. William Knight recorded:

One day while we were walking up the steep mountain side to do work in the Humbug claim, father said, “Will, I want to tell you something. We are going to have all the money that we want as soon as we are in a position to handle it properly. We will some day save the credit of the Church.” [Jesse Knight Family, 39]

Well, you know how children are with their parents. J. William was in disbelief. He reminded his father that they had mortgaged the ranch and that the Church, at this difficult juncture in 1896, “was in debt probably over a million dollars.” Will thought his father’s statement was “ridiculous,” and he said that he “argued considerably” with him (*Jesse Knight Family*, 39).

Here is where Jesse now sounded just like his mother. He replied, “I don’t want to quarrel with you about it, but I never had anything come to me with greater force than the impression that came to me at this time, and all I want you to do is to remember what I am saying” (p. 39). Jesse regarded their future wealth as a sure thing and felt that it would be given strictly “for the purpose of doing good and building up the Church” (*Jesse Knight Family*, 39–40). So Jesse and his son didn’t argue or discuss the matter any further.

About three o’clock one morning in August 1896, one of the two hired miners came down from the tunnel and said that he had just struck a vein containing ore. J. William was excited, but his father Jesse was rather subdued about it. They both went up to the tunnel, and Jesse went in and loaded up the first wheelbarrow full of ore and came out and dumped it on a small platform. Then he stated, “I have done the last day’s work that I ever expect to do where I take another man’s job from him” (in *Jesse Knight Family*, 40). From then on he hoped he would be able to provide work and employment opportunities for others.

Before we finish our field trip here today, let me tell you about the ore. It may have been mostly lead sulfide or lead carbonate, but the real value of the ore was in gold and silver. Each ton of ore contained roughly 175 ounces of silver and 3.8 ounces of gold, which is very rich ore (see *Jesse Knight Family*, 41). So just a small pile of rock would contain the equivalent of 175 of these one-ounce silver coins. This is impressive, considering that this was supposedly a humbug of a claim!

It seems that the Lord was intent on testing Jesse’s willingness to use this initial wealth strictly “for the purpose of doing good and building up the Church.” This is how it unfolded. By the time October conference had arrived, Jesse had only made one shipment of ore. It was very rich ore and may have been worth about \$11,000—similar to the second shipment that he sent in late October. At this time Jesse was living in Provo. At the end of general conference, his bishop and all other bishops and stake presidencies were invited to a special priesthood meeting. Near the end of the meeting, President Woodruff made a special plea to the bishops to visit with anyone in their wards who might loan the Church money for a short period of time. He explained to them that the Church was in very difficult financial circumstances because the federal government had confiscated a great deal of Church property. He said that “there were some very pressing demands” on the Church and that “the credit of the Church was at stake” (as reported by Joseph B. Keeler, in *Jesse Knight Family*, 84).

Jesse’s bishop thought nothing more about it until he was returning home from the Provo Tabernacle several weeks later. When he was a short distance from home, he clearly heard an audible voice say, “Jesse Knight will lend the Church \$10,000.00” (Joseph B. Keeler, quoted in *Jesse Knight Family*, 84). That was all the voice said, but he then clearly remembered what President Woodruff had asked of the bishops. He immediately went to Jesse Knight’s house and began to relate what President Woodruff had told them about the Church’s financial difficulties. Jesse Knight interrupted Bishop Keeler and said that he would loan the Church \$10,000 and that he would have the check ready by the following morning. (See *Jesse Knight Family*, 84.)

Now how much money did Jesse have on hand at this time? He had probably received just one or two payments of around \$11,000.

Jesse had no way of knowing whether his newly found supply of ore might end as suddenly as it had appeared. But he was willing to do what his mother had done before him when she emptied her purse to free the Prophet Joseph Smith or when she gave her three yoke of oxen and two wagons to another family at the request of Brigham Young. Jesse followed through and wrote the check with no hesitation. Bishop Joseph Keeler noted that when President Woodruff received the sealed envelope from Jesse on the following day, “It appeared to me that a great weight was lifted off his mind.” President Woodruff then wrote Jesse Knight a letter stating that he had saved the credit of the Church. His letter concluded with the following benediction: “I feel very thankful to you, and feel with every sentiment of my heart to say, God bless you and prosper you” (in *Jesse Knight Family*, 85).

Jesse was blessed, and he prospered from that day on. This was the first of a number of discoveries that he made on the east side of the mountain. The ore turned out to be nearly continuous underground for a distance of about two miles. Jesse’s mines eventually netted more than \$10 million. (See *Jesse Knight Family*, 42–43.)

Here we are now, 105 years after that October conference when the Church was in such dire need and Jesse Knight was the willing conduit through which the Lord poured out a needed blessing. The Church has prospered and the Saints have prospered. I am sure that most of you know that much of our campus is constructed on land donated by Jesse Knight and his family. Four of the first eight buildings were built largely from their donations as well.

So why did this all happen? Why did the Lord choose Jesse Knight to save the credit of the Church and financially save this university? Was it Jesse’s own sincere repentance and change of heart and his remarkable unselfishness? Was it his mother’s frequent prayers in

the temple? Was it his oldest daughter’s unselfish sacrifice and parting benediction when she said, “Oh God, bless our household?” Was it his mother’s unselfishness when she emptied her purse on the table in Kirtland to free the Prophet? Or when she gave her three yoke of oxen and two wagons to another family to go west while she stayed in Winter Quarters another three years? Would the Lord look back upon his grandfather’s support of the Prophet during the translation of the Book of Mormon and then bless Jesse in return? Or was it all of these multiplied together? Do blessings carry forward that far? Moses had the answer:

Know therefore that the Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations.
[Deuteronomy 7:9]

As impressive as the material blessings are that we sometimes focus on in this story, they are *not* the critical part of the story. Do you think that Lydia ever once prayed in the temple that her wayward son Jesse would become fabulously wealthy? Of course not! The *real story* is that a mother’s relentless prayers were answered, her son repented, and the angels rejoiced (see D&C 88:2)!

Did Lydia need to wait patiently on the Lord? Absolutely! Jesse did not repent in his mother’s lifetime, but, along with other Saints, she received this promise: that her prayers had entered the ears of the Lord, and He confirmed to her that they would be granted (see D&C 98:2). To Lydia and to us the Lord makes this promise concerning our heartfelt prayers:

He giveth this promise unto you, with an immutable covenant that they shall be fulfilled; and all things wherewith you have been afflicted shall work together for your good, and to my name’s glory, saith the Lord. [D&C 98:3]

How much of this story is written in the biography of the Lord? When Lydia prayed by the bedside of her husband for forgiveness for her sins and pleaded that her companion's sufferings might cease, did the Lord know the depth of her anguish at that moment? When she went on without her husband but with seven small children to Winter Quarters, could He really understand it? When "her heart cried out in sorrow many times, for her burden seemed more than she could bear," did He fathom it? "Surely he hath borne [her] griefs, and carried [her] sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4).

Can you see that there would be all these details and multitudes more about each of our lives written in His biography because He has borne them? Consequently, as we reflect upon the lives of Saints, we can begin to *feel* the awesome power of the Atonement. That is the point I want to make! Can you mentally fathom a biography that is more than a thousand trillion volumes in length? No! By *feeling* we come to understand the Atonement better than by just having a mastery of all the facts. Perhaps this is why the fruit of the tree of life is shed into our hearts (see 1 Nephi 11:22). In our *hearts* we can feel and understand His love.

Is there an upper or lower limit to what our hearts can comprehend and feel? Moses recorded that Enoch's "heart swelled wide as eternity . . . and all eternity shook" (Moses 7:41). On a less grand scale, when we even detect these subtle "swelling motions," we know that they are "real" and "most precious" and "sweet above all that is sweet" (Alma 32:28, 35, 42).

Once we really come to know all that the Lord has done for us and for all our brothers

and sisters, we will have a powerful motivating force to keep God's commandments. Sinning is unthinkable during those moments of seeing "things as they really are" (Jacob 4:13).

Finally, don't you wish you could read ahead a little in our Savior's biography to see how your individual chapter will proceed? As the Lord stands at the door and knocks (see Revelation 3:20), will you someday open that door and be "clasped in the arms of Jesus" (Mormon 5:11)?

Once when I was writing in my journal, my daughter Bonnie asked me if I had mentioned her that day in any of my writing. She wanted some reassurance of my love and interest in her. Was she important enough to be mentioned? I had forgotten her that day, and my heart melted. The Lord reassures Bonnie and each of us: "Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:15–16). So how often would we be mentioned in the Lord's biography? More often than we realize, for the Lord "ever liveth" to intercede on our behalf (Hebrews 7:25; see also Romans 8:34–35, 38–39). We hope our chapter in His biography will have no end.

My challenge to you today is to search diligently and actively participate to know and feel the love of Christ. If we are constantly seeking to know the breadth and depth of His atoning love and how very personal it really is, our seeking will not be in vain. Along with Abraham, one day we will be able to say, "Thy servant has sought thee earnestly; now I have found thee" (Abraham 2:12). I pray that it may be so with each of us, in the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.