

# *What Does the Atonement Mean to You?*

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It is wonderful to be with you and to consider together President Hinckley's challenge to "rise to the divinity within us."<sup>1</sup> It is my judgment we can most effectively do this by knowing, understanding, and incorporating into our lives the special assets and blessings of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

As with our Nephite brothers and sisters of 2500 years ago, "we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ."<sup>2</sup> Even with all the current falsehoods and distractions about Jesus Christ created by the adversary, as well as the many misunderstandings expressed by others regarding our theology, it has always been the case, as taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith, that "the fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it."<sup>3</sup>

These fundamental principles are grounded in the Atonement of Jesus Christ. As we read in the Bible Dictionary, "The word [Atonement] describes the setting 'at one' of those who have been estranged, and denotes the reconciliation of man to God. Sin is the cause of the estrangement, and therefore the purpose of atonement is to correct or overcome the consequences of sin."<sup>4</sup> I believe it is also possible to become estranged from God for many reasons other than overt sin. For example, when a disaster or disappointment strikes, there may be the temptation to ask, "Why me?" or to say, "It isn't fair!"

The risks of our establishing or stretching an unnecessary distance from our Father in Heaven and the Savior are significant and constantly around us. Happily, the Atonement was meant for all of these situations as well. That is why Jacob, the brother of Nephi, described the Atonement as "infinite,"<sup>5</sup> meaning without limitations or externally imposed constraints. That is why the Atonement is so remarkable and so necessary. Little wonder, then, that we not only need to appreciate this incomparable gift but also to understand it clearly.

Jesus Christ was the only one capable of performing the magnificent Atonement because He was the only perfect man and the Only Begotten Son of God the Father. He received His commission for this essential work from His Father before the world was established. His perfect mortal life devoid of sin, the shedding of His blood, His suffering in the garden and upon the cross leading to His voluntary death, and the resurrection of His body from the tomb made possible a full atonement for people of every generation and time.

As we know, the Atonement makes the Resurrection a reality for everyone without qualification. With respect to our individual transgressions and sins, however, there are conditional aspects of the Atonement that require our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, our repentance, and our compliance with the laws and ordinances of the gospel.

Much of our understanding and knowledge of the Atonement comes from the Restoration scriptures. While the Old Testament is replete with Atonement references, only one verse in the New Testament mentions Christ's Atonement using this very word. The word *atonement* is used more than thirty times in the Book of Mormon—small wonder that it is “another testament of Jesus Christ.” In addition to Atonement insights in the Book of Mormon, some of which I will mention shortly, the doctrinal depths of the Atonement are also plumbed with sacred perspective in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price.

Perhaps the most oft-quoted verse in our Latter-day Saint meetings and writings is this wonderful clarifying and summarizing verse from the Book of Moses:

“For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.”<sup>6</sup>

Because of the Resurrection, all of us will have immortality. Because of the Atonement, those who have sufficient faith in the Lord Jesus Christ to take upon themselves His name, who repent and live in accordance with His gospel, who keep covenants made with Him and His Father, and who participate in the saving ordinances made available in sacred ways and places will experience and enjoy eternal life.

I don't know about you, but I cannot recall ever encountering a person with professed strong faith in Jesus Christ who was very worried about the Resurrection. Yes, all of us may have questions about the details, but we understand that the fundamental promise is all-inclusive and sure.

Because eternal life is conditional and requires our effort and compliance, most of us do struggle from time to time, perhaps regularly—even constantly—with questions related to living the way we know we should. As Elder David A. Bednar has asked, do we “mistakenly believe we must make the journey from good to better and become a saint through sheer grit, willpower, and discipline”? In other words, to achieve the complete and promised blessings of Jesus' Atonement, do we need to do it on our own?<sup>7</sup>

If it is the case that our salvation is only a matter of our own effort, then we are in serious trouble, since we are all imperfect and unable to comply fully in every way all of the time. If we are not

fully independent in our quest for eternal life, then how do we achieve the help and assistance we require? Nephi clarified the dilemma of the relationship between grace and works as he testified, “For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.”<sup>8</sup>

Unlike the word *atonement*, the word *grace* appears frequently in the New Testament. The Bible Dictionary reminds us that *grace* means a divine mechanism or device that brings strength or help through the mercy and love of Jesus Christ made available by His Atonement.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is through the grace of Christ that we are resurrected, and it is His grace, love, and Atonement that help us accomplish the good works and make the necessary progress that otherwise would be impossible if left solely to our own capacities and resources.

Given all that has been said, let me now ask each of us these questions: What does the Atonement mean to you? What are the implications of the Atonement for the problems and challenges you face? How can we access the happiness we have been promised in our mortal lives and gain a comfortable assurance that we will achieve eternal life? How may I narrow the gap between who I am and the person I want and need to become? These are tough questions, but necessary queries if we are really serious in our discipleship of the Savior and in our quest to be like Him and eventually be with Him.

Among the many things I admire about Nephi was his attitude. Let me mention an example or two that I believe bear on the questions we have about incorporating the Atonement into our lives. As we know, Nephi’s life was not an easy one, particularly in comparison with the comfort most of us take for granted today. He and his family lived for years in the wilderness before arriving in the promised land. There were periods of hunger, thirst, and danger. He had to deal with serious family problems exacerbated by Laman and Lemuel. Finally, about thirty years after leaving Jerusalem, Nephi and the family members trying to keep the commandments of the Lord needed to separate themselves from those relatives siding with Laman and Lemuel in their iniquity. That meant once again starting over in the wilderness.

In the face of all these privations and difficulties, Nephi was able to say, “And it came to pass that we lived after the manner of happiness.”<sup>10</sup>

He understood that there is a pattern for living that results in happiness, independent of the difficulties, challenges, and disappointments that come into all of our lives. He was able to focus on the “big picture” of God’s plan for him and his people and was thus able to avoid being brought down by his frustrations or by the accurate observation that life is not fair. It isn’t fair and, in spite of this truth, he and his people were happy. They understood an atonement would take place and they had confidence it would include them.

This is not to represent that Nephi was unaware of his serious problems or that he was devoid of disappointment. Think of the tender period that occurred for Nephi and his family at the time of the death of father Lehi. You recall that Lehi called all of his children together and gave his sons specific counsel and blessings. We can easily imagine that it was difficult for Nephi as a younger son to be appointed as a leader for his older brethren. It was even more difficult for Laman and Lemuel to be subject to their younger brother, and they were grossly cruel to Nephi as he attempted to keep all of the family on the straight and narrow path.

Not only was Nephi saddened by the conduct and attitudes of his brethren, he was painfully aware of his own inadequacies. Listen to some of his words:

“Behold, my soul delighteth in the things of the Lord; and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard.

“Nevertheless, 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 mine iniquities.”<sup>11</sup>

If I were to continue to read his account, you would hear of his appreciation to God for his blessings. You would hear his testimony about the ministering of angels he had experienced as a result of his prayers. You would hear of the wonderful and magnificent things he had been shown. I will now return to Nephi’s words as he asks himself important questions that we might ask ourselves as we consider the place of Christ’s Atonement in our own lives:

“O then, if I have seen so great things, if the Lord in his condescension unto the children of men hath visited men in so much mercy, why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken, because of mine afflictions?

“And why should I yield to sin, because of my flesh? Yea, why should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul? Why am I angry because of mine enemy.”<sup>12</sup>

After his lament, he then answered his own questions, knowing the approach to his problems that he must take. Said he: “Awake my soul! No longer droop in sin. Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul. . . . O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever.”<sup>13</sup>

Does this mean that Nephi no longer had problems? I don’t think so. Does it mean that he fully understood all that was happening to him? Again, I’m convinced he did not. Remember the answer that Nephi gave to an angel several years before when he was asked a very important question related to the Atonement of Christ that was yet to occur in the future.

Nephi said, “I know that he [meaning God] loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.”<sup>14</sup>

We also can’t and won’t know the meaning of all things, but we can and must know that the Lord loves His children and that we can be the beneficiaries of a full measure of Christ’s grace and Atonement in our lives and in our struggles. Likewise, we know and must remember the foolishness and danger of giving “the evil one place in our hearts.”

Even when we fully understand and commit to excluding evil and the evil one from our hearts and from our lives, we fall short because we are too often “natural” men and women. Thus, we must be grateful for and also practitioners of the principle of repentance. While we often speak of our

repentance as an event, which it sometimes is, for most of us it is a constant, lifelong process.

Of course, there are sins of both omission and commission for which we can immediately begin the repentance process and never again visit a particular kind of iniquity or mistake. We can, for example, be absolutely perfect full-tithe payers for the rest of our days, even if that has not always been the case. But there are other dimensions of our lives that require our continual improvement and constant attention, such as our spirituality, our charity, our sensitivity to others, our consideration for our family members, our concern for our neighbors, our understanding of the scriptures, the quality of our personal prayers, our temple participation, and the like.

We can be grateful that the Savior, understanding us better than we understand ourselves, instituted the sacrament that we might regularly renew our covenants by partaking of the sacred emblems with the commitment to take upon ourselves His holy name, to always remember Him, and to keep His commandments. As we follow the pattern that causes us to “live after the manner of happiness,” our repentance and our performance assume a higher quality, and our ability to understand and appreciate the magnificence of the Atonement increases.

In the weeks prior to the organization of the Church in 1830, the Prophet Joseph Smith received a remarkable revelation that adds to the rich store of our understanding about the Atonement because it was the Savior Himself who was speaking and teaching. He described Himself as “the Redeemer of the world”<sup>15</sup> and acknowledged that He was following the will of the Father.

Said He: “Wherefore, I command you to repent, and keep the commandments which you have received.”<sup>16</sup>

This simple pattern of repentance and obedience, repeated in clarity so many times, really is the basis for “living after the manner of happiness.” We know this is what we need to do. Sometimes we might forget why it is that we need to do so. Let me continue with more of the Savior’s words from the same revelation:

“Therefore, I command you to repent—repent, lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, how hard to bear you know not.

“For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent;

“But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I;

“Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—

“Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.”<sup>17</sup>

What a remarkable lesson. I am sure that none of us can imagine the significance and the intensity of the Lord's pain as He accomplished the great Atonement. I seriously doubt that Joseph Smith at that time had a complete sense of the suffering of the Savior. The Prophet did gain greater appreciation and understanding from his own trials and torture in later years. Think of the corrective instruction given by Jesus Himself as He counseled and comforted Joseph in the dark hours of his Liberty Jail incarceration. After enumerating not only all that had happened to the Prophet Joseph and his associates, but also all that could yet befall them, the Lord simply said: "The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?"<sup>18</sup>

This question to Joseph is also a question to each of us in our personal and unique struggles and challenges. None of us should ever be in doubt as to the correct answer.

That Jesus experienced what He experienced, not because He couldn't avoid it but because He loves us, is sobering indeed. And not only does He love us, but He loves and honors His Father with a depth and loyalty that we can only begin to imagine. While this might be sufficient in its own right, we must never forget, if we feel to honor and love Him, that Jesus Christ did what He did for us that we might not suffer to the same degree that justice alone would require of us.

As some of you might know, I have a background in medicine. For many years, articles have appeared in the medical literature that have discussed the Savior's suffering and the pain that He experienced. I'll not detail any that have been written. I will report, however, that those most conversant with the realities of pain understand better the enormity of His sacrifice. The scourging, the privations, the abuse, the nails, and the inconceivable stress all led to His experiencing excruciating agony that could not be tolerated by anyone without His powers and without His determination to stay the course and suffer all that could be meted out. Bleeding from every pore is most uncommon, but is also well documented. It occurs only under very unusual conditions of almost unimaginable stress—the stress Jesus necessarily suffered for us to make His Atonement in our behalf possible.

As we consider the comprehensiveness of the Atonement and the Redeemer's willingness to suffer for all of our sins, we should gratefully acknowledge that the atoning sacrifice also covers so much more! Listen to these words of Alma to the faithful people of Gideon almost a century before the Atonement was actualized:

"And he [meaning Jesus] shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

"And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.

"Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance; and now behold, this is the testimony which is in

me.”<sup>19</sup>

Think of a full and comprehensive remedy for our pains, afflictions, temptations, sicknesses, sins, disappointments, and transgressions. Can you imagine any alternative to Jesus’ Atonement? Then add to that the incomparable Resurrection and we begin to understand just enough to sing, “I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me.”<sup>20</sup>

What does the Atonement mean to you and to me? It means everything. As Jacob explained, we can “be reconciled unto [the Father] through the Atonement of Christ, his Only Begotten Son.”<sup>21</sup> This means that we can come into full harmony and complete acceptance with Him. It means that we can avoid the mistakes or misunderstandings that “denieth the mercies of Christ, and setteth at naught the atonement of him and the power of his redemption.”<sup>22</sup>

We avoid dishonoring and disrespecting the Savior’s Atonement by heeding the counsel of Helaman, which is as pertinent today as it was in the years immediately preceding the Lord’s earthly advent. Said he:

“O remember, remember, my sons, the words which king Benjamin spake unto his people; yea, remember that there is no other way nor means whereby man [meaning women and men] can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, who shall come; yea, remember that he cometh to redeem the world.”<sup>23</sup>

His Atonement does indeed cover the world and its people from the beginning to the end. Let us not forget, however, that in its comprehensiveness and completeness it is also intensely personal and uniquely crafted to fit perfectly and address perfectly each of our own individual circumstances and situations. The Father and the Son know each of us better than we know ourselves and have prepared an atonement for us that is fully congruent with our needs, challenges, and possibilities.

Thanks be to God for the gift of His Son and thanks to the Savior for His Atonement. It is true and is in effect and will lead us where we need and want to be.

Remember the wise advice and counsel from the Proverbs:

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”<sup>24</sup>

His path, via the Atonement of Jesus Christ, which must be our path, leads us back to Him.

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