

The Miracle of Forgiveness

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The New Testament writer Luke described¹ a fascinating scene from the Savior's life in which Jesus, sitting at meat in the house of Simon the Pharisee, was approached by a woman who was widely known to have been a sinner. Her behavior, as she approached the Savior, revealed that she must have had some previous interaction with Him of a very personal and life-changing nature, for she tearfully knelt and kissed his feet, literally bathing his feet with her humble tears before wiping them dry with her tresses and applying precious ointment "as a [servant] might do to his master."²

Simon, aware of the woman's past indiscretions, inwardly reproved Jesus for allowing a sinner to approach Him in such a manner. Discerning this unrighteous judgment on the part of Simon, Christ artfully rebuked him, and then, speaking to the woman, He said something truly wondrous: "Thy sins are forgiven." Indeed, a miracle had occurred! A miracle more powerful and momentous than the changing of water into wine or the healing of a leper—a miracle tantamount to the raising of one from the grave, for verily a precious daughter of our Heavenly Father had, in very fact, been born again and saved from spiritual death.

On hearing this account, one cannot help but ask, as did the Book of Mormon writer Enos when he heard a similar declaration of forgiveness following a long and tearful night of anguished soul-searching and prayerful pleading: "How is it done?"³ Today I would like to speak to you of what Spencer W. Kimball called "the miracle of forgiveness."⁴

Two weeks ago I was released as bishop after six years of service, having also served as bishop previously in another ward and as a student branch president prior to that. One of the most marvelous things about serving as a bishop or branch president is sitting in private council with individual members of your congregation and discussing their concerns relating to their personal worthiness and their standing before God; for it is during these sacred times that a bishop receives a large measure of the inspiration and understanding that will come to him by virtue of his calling as a judge in Israel. And I can attest that at such times I have been given to understand more fully the role of the Savior and His Atonement

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in our Heavenly Father's plan and the truly miraculous nature of forgiveness.

To fully understand this miracle, we must contemplate the grand and glorious plan of salvation authored by our Father in Heaven. Before we came to this earth we lived as spirits⁵ with our heavenly parents and siblings, including our Elder Brother Jesus Christ. In that premortal realm a grand council⁶ was called, and we were presented with our Heavenly Father's plan, which allowed our further progression. We do not know all the details of that council, but from the scriptures and the writings of latter-day prophets we can imagine how it might have transpired. We were told of a new world (this earth) to which we would come to receive a physical body. In coming to this earth we would not retain a remembrance of our pre-earth life. Rather, we would be given the opportunity to be tested and tried that we might learn by our own experience to choose good over evil.⁷

In this council the Father told us⁸ that there were laws and ordinances that we would need to obey and receive in order to prepare ourselves to return to live with Him. We were also told that great blessings would come through obedience to each of the commandments,⁹ whereas negative consequences (or punishments, if you will) would be the result of violating God's laws.¹⁰ It was explained to us that God would give to each of us the Light of Christ, or the ability to discern between right and wrong.¹¹ He would also reveal to us His will through prophets and apostles.¹² Thus the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi taught that "men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil. And the law is given unto men."¹³

Each of us understood the necessity of this earth life, but we also knew that this would be a difficult test and that each of us would undoubtedly stumble along the way and transgress the laws of God, placing ourselves in a situation in which we must be subject to the

prescribed punishment. We understood that one of the punishments for sin was to be cut off from God's presence and to be halted in our eternal progression.¹⁴ I can imagine that this potential outcome of the plan would have been very troubling for us to contemplate. In fact, this aspect of the plan was so disconcerting that one-third¹⁵ of our spirit siblings rebelled¹⁶ against this plan and followed Satan, who rose up with great swelling words, claiming that *he* could save us *all* and none would be lost nor suffer.¹⁷ The remaining two-thirds of us, however, were willing to accept God's plan. Why? Because it included the possibility for change and growth and improvement through repentance. This gift of mercy would be made possible through a savior—one who would come to this earth, as we read in *Lectures on Faith*,¹⁸ to do the following:

First: This savior would descend in suffering below that which any other man or woman would suffer.

Second: He would be subject to temptation beyond that which any other man or woman would be subjected.

Third: Despite this suffering and temptation, he would keep the law of God in every detail and live a sinless life, thus "showing . . . that it is in the power of man to keep the law and remain . . . without sin; and also, that by him a righteous judgment might come upon all flesh, . . . that all who walk not in the law of God may justly be condemned by the law, and have no excuse for their sins."¹⁹

Finally: This savior's perfection would also place him in a position to carry out his ultimate responsibilities, which would be: first, to atone for the sins of the world by taking upon him the entire burden of the prescribed punishment for the sins and transgressions of all mankind, thus redeeming them from the first spiritual death;²⁰ and, second, to voluntarily be put to death by those for whom he suffered, that he might rise again from the

tomb, thus releasing the bands of physical death.²¹

Can you imagine such a responsibility? It was utterly and completely beyond *our* ability to serve in this capacity. And yet there was one—even Jesus Christ—who humbly stepped forward and said, “[Father,] here am I.”²²

Yes, it was Christ who stepped forward in the premortal council and accepted the role of Savior. He was the only one who could have filled that role, and we need to know and understand that each and every one of us in the premortal world accepted Christ as our Savior and Redeemer.²³ In so doing, we accepted the terms or conditions of His Atonement. Given the importance of covenants in God’s plan and knowing that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow,²⁴ I believe that it is entirely reasonable to suggest that in the premortal world Christ *covenanted* with us that He would fulfill this awesome responsibility to be our Savior, and *we* in turn covenanted with *Him* that we would do whatever He asked in return.²⁵

It is important for us to understand the need for a savior. This is made abundantly clear in the Book of Mormon, especially in Alma 42,²⁶ in which we are taught that through disobedience all mankind is fallen and subject to the demands of justice, which consigns us to be forever cut off from God’s presence. To paraphrase: God is a perfect being and cannot lie. If He decreed a punishment for disobedience to His laws, including being cut off from His presence, such punishment must be meted out every time the law is broken. Otherwise God would not be truthful. Likewise, this punishment must be meted out to any and all who are disobedient or God would not be just. Fortunately there is a means of providing mercy, which is difficult to fully comprehend. It is, in part, that the demands of the law can be satisfied by one who is without sin voluntarily receiving the full and

total punishment on behalf of the disobedient offender—in which case we become subject to the demands of he who suffered for us.²⁷ In fact, it is only in this manner that we may return to our Father’s presence to dwell.²⁸ We cannot do it by suffering the punishment for our own sins. We can only do it by complying with the premortal covenant we made to accept Christ as our Savior and to fulfill our end of the agreement.

And so we might ask: What are the terms that we agreed to? What is it that Christ asks of us in exchange for His suffering on our behalf? In section 19 of the Doctrine and Covenants, Christ has told us:

I . . . 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.²⁹

Simply put, Christ asks that we *repent* in exchange for His suffering. Christ *commands* that we repent in exchange for His suffering.³⁰ And, equally important, *we agreed* to repent in exchange for Christ’s suffering.

Repentance! What is repentance? How do we repent? What does repentance entail? We get some insight into repentance by studying the law of sacrifice, given to Moses as a type to point forward to the coming Atonement of Christ.³¹ In Leviticus we read:

If a soul sin, and commit a trespass against the Lord, and lie unto his neighbour . . . or [take] a thing . . . by violence . . . ;

Or [find] that which was lost, and [lie] concerning it, and [swear] falsely . . . ;

Then it shall be, because he hath sinned, and is guilty, that he shall restore that which he took

violently away, or the thing which he hath deceitfully gotten, or . . . the lost thing which he found, . . . he shall even restore it in the principal, . . . and give it unto him to whom it appertaineth. . . .

And he shall bring [a] trespass offering unto the Lord, a ram without blemish out of the flock, . . . for a trespass offering, unto the priest:

And the priest shall make an atonement for him before the Lord: and it shall be forgiven him for any thing of all that he hath done in trespassing therein.³²

Here we clearly see some important elements of repentance. He or she who sinned was to acknowledge their wrongdoing, make restitution for the wrong they had done, and confess their sins to the priest. They were also to make an offering to the Lord through the priest—which offering was to be a ram without blemish. This sacrifice, as we read in Moses,³³ was in similitude of the sacrifice of the perfect Christ. Thus the sacrifice was required to be a male and without blemish.

The requirements of Christ and the elements of repentance have changed very little from the time of Moses to our day. We are still required to acknowledge our faults, to make restitution, and to confess our sins to the priest or bishop. In section 58 of the Doctrine and Covenants we read: “By this ye may know if a man [or woman] repenteth of [their] sins—behold, [they] will confess them and forsake them.”³⁴

With respect to confession, it would be appropriate to consider the situation of Enos, whom I mentioned earlier. I have observed that many Latter-day Saints erroneously confuse Enos’ circumstances with their own, and in their misunderstanding they attempt to avoid involving their bishop or other ecclesiastical leader in the process of their confession and subsequent repentance.

By way of illustration, one young man who was anxious to serve a mission came to my home late one evening and poured out his

heart to me in confession. He had been up in the hills praying for forgiveness. During the mental and spiritual turmoil caused by his sins, his mind had been drawn back to the story of Enos. At length he convinced himself that he would seek forgiveness directly from the Lord in personal, fervent prayer, even if he—like Enos—had to pray all night.

The young man prayed long, hard, fervently, and tearfully with much energy, anguish, and humility. Yet he did not receive a witness that his sins had been forgiven; rather, he received an overwhelming impression that he should go confess his sins to his bishop. Soon the young man had properly confessed all the transgressions from his past to an authorized representative of the Lord, and together they had established a plan to help him put his spiritual life in order.

In the fully organized, restored Church of Jesus Christ—which has a complete line of authorized priesthood leaders in every ward, branch, stake, district, or mission—complete repentance of serious sins always involves confession to the proper ecclesiastical leader in addition to humble prayer to our Heavenly Father.

Let us ask a corollary question: Why would this young man, or anyone for that matter, seek to omit this important step in the repentance process?

After many such experiences I have observed that Satan preys on people’s great sense of fear regarding the potential outcome of such a confession. Most members of the Church also admire and respect their bishop, and the last thing they want is for their bishop to know who they really are and to feel disappointed in them. It shouldn’t surprise you that your bishop already knows who you are: a precious child of God whose eternal worth is beyond measure. The overwhelming feelings that pour into a bishop’s heart at these times are ones of gratitude and love rather than of disappointment: “For this [my] brother [or

sister] was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.”³⁵

The only time a bishop feels disappointed is when he learns that someone failed to take advantage of the opportunity to cast the shackles of sin at Christ’s feet and to walk out of the office freed from the heavy oppression of Satan’s grasp.

But, to return to the pattern for repentance outlined in the passage from Leviticus: In addition to confessing our sins and making restitution, we are also still required to make a sacrificial offering to the Lord, but an offering of a different nature. In the Book of Mormon we read the account in which the resurrected Lord, having only recently offered Himself up as the ultimate sacrifice for sin, spoke to the Nephites on the American continent. To them He said:

*Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. . . .
 . . . The scriptures concerning my coming are fulfilled.*

And as many as have received me, to them have I given to become the sons of God; and even so will I to as many as shall believe on my name, for behold, by me redemption cometh, and in me is the law of Moses fulfilled. . . .

And ye shall offer up unto me no more the shedding of blood; yea, your sacrifices and your burnt offerings shall be done away, for I will accept none of your sacrifices and your burnt offerings.

*And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost.*³⁶

This offering of a broken heart and a contrite spirit is, in my mind, perhaps the most critical aspect of repentance. For it is this offering that indicates the true condition of our souls. How do we know if we have a broken heart and a contrite spirit? I believe that this is exemplified by one who comes forward will-

ingly, of their own volition, and confesses their sins to any they might have offended, and the bishop if necessary, but without any pretense or effort to make excuses. A person who has a broken heart and a contrite spirit understands the significance of their act and wants to do anything and everything within their power to set it right.

In coming forward and humbly and meekly confessing, it is as if they present before the Lord—and offer up on the altar for all to see—the natural man that is in them, with all of his weakness and depravity. They seek not to hide their faults but openly acknowledge their faults and humbly seek forgiveness. I believe that this is what is meant by putting off the natural man, who is an enemy to God.³⁷ For by humbly and contritely offering the natural man up on the altar of confession—as a sacrifice, if you will—we rid ourselves of him and “become new creatures”³⁸ through Christ. Christ then becomes our spiritual Father, or the Father of our spiritual rebirth. For it is through His Atonement that this is made possible. This helps us understand the imagery used by Isaiah, who said, speaking of the Savior, “It pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, [then] he shall see his seed. . . . [Then] he shall see . . . the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied.”³⁹

I cannot read this scripture without picturing in my mind’s eye my wife, Holly, after having struggled through the intense and anguishing pain of childbirth, looking down at the product of her travail with tears of joy in her eyes. Our *spiritual* rebirth has come through the travail of Christ. As Abinidi taught, *we*—meaning all who have accepted His offering and met the requirements of repentance, as part of the covenant of the Atonement—are His seed.⁴⁰ And Christ, in like manner, rejoices in the product of His travail.

And again I ask, What is repentance? It is that we exercise faith in the atoning sacrifice

of Christ by confessing and forsaking our sins and offering up a sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit before the Lord. There is no superhuman feat or great thing that we must do to receive God's forgiveness.

Unfortunately, many sometimes feel as did Naaman, captain of the host of Syria, who was smitten with leprosy.⁴¹ Naaman exercised sufficient faith to approach Elisha, the Lord's prophet, to seek a blessing. But when Elisha sent his servant to tell him that all he needed to do was to dip himself seven times in the river Jordan to be healed, Naaman left in anger, feeling that it was too light a thing to be taken seriously. Fortunately Naaman had a wise servant who asked, "My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?"⁴² Naaman did as his servant counseled and was healed.

I have seen some individuals who have confessed and forsaken their sins with a broken heart and a contrite spirit and yet are unable to accept the forgiveness that comes through the Atonement. They, like Naaman, have sufficient faith to approach the bishop but feel that the Lord can't truly be willing to forgive them without their doing some great thing. They do not understand the miracle of forgiveness or the wonderful gift of grace that the Atonement is.

Just how miraculous is the Atonement? So miraculous that a very clear type had to be given in the wilderness of Mount Hor to allow us to comprehend that, just as those who exercised sufficient faith to look upon the brazen serpent were healed,⁴³ "even so as many as should look upon the Son of God with faith, having a contrite spirit, might live, even unto that life which is eternal."⁴⁴

Christ taught:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and . . . ye shall find rest unto your souls.

*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*⁴⁵

My brothers and sisters, we can't work off our sins. I repeat: We *cannot* work off our sins. It is only through Christ's Atonement that we can be forgiven of our sins. It may be true that service to God and our fellowman can bring us to a state in which we are able to exercise faith in Christ's Atonement sufficient to be healed, primarily by making us more receptive to the Spirit and by helping those who are weak in the faith to have hope that maybe, just maybe, they might be found acceptable before the Lord. However, it is not our works that save us from sin. For unless these works bring us to the point where we can look to Christ and accept His Atonement by meeting the demands of repentance, they truly avail us nothing. The same holds true for mortal suffering. Did not Christ say that *He* had "suffered these things for all, that *they* might *not* suffer"? We cannot enter the kingdom of heaven by suffering for our own sins.

We should clearly understand that Christ has *already* suffered and paid the price for *all* of our sins.⁴⁶ It is a mistaken and misleading notion to think that Christ only suffered for the sins of which we repent. Book of Mormon prophets teach that Christ's Atonement was infinite, eternal, and all-encompassing.⁴⁷ Christ's Atonement covered all sin, all transgression, all wrongdoing.⁴⁸ And because He suffered for our sins, He can come before the Father in the Day of Judgment on behalf of those who have repented of their sins to offer intercession, as expressed by Him in the following scripture:

Listen to him who is [your] advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—

Saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed,

the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified;

Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren **that believe on my name**, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life.⁴⁹

So we should have faith! So we should have hope! So we should look to Christ and live! Remember the words of the Lord as spoken through His prophet Isaiah: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”⁵⁰

And remember also the words of the Lord, spoken with great frankness to Joseph Smith in modern times: “Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more.”⁵¹

My dear brothers and sisters: Believe in Christ! Believe His words!

I bear testimony and solemn witness to the absolute necessity of Christ’s Atonement. Without it we cannot be saved. I bear witness of His incomprehensible love. He stands always with hands outstretched, waiting to receive us.

That we may all look to Christ and live by coming forward and receiving the miracle of forgiveness He offers is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Luke 7:36–50.
2. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956), 262.
3. Enos 1:7.
4. See Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969).
5. See Abraham 3:23; Hebrews 12:9.
6. See Job 38:4–7; Abraham 3:23–26.
7. See Abraham 3:25; 2 Nephi 2:5.
8. See Alma 13:1.
9. See D&C 130:21; 132:5.

10. See 2 Nephi 2:26; Alma 12:32–36; Alma 42:16–18.
11. See Moroni 7:16–19.
12. See Amos 3:7.
13. 2 Nephi 2:5.
14. See Alma 42:14; see also Bible Dictionary, s.v. “damnation,” 652.
15. See Revelation 12:4; D&C 29:36–37.
16. See Revelation 12:7.
17. See Moses 4:1.
18. See *Lectures on Faith*, 48 (Lecture Fifth).
19. *Lectures on Faith*, 48 (5:2).
20. See Helaman 14:16.
21. See 1 Corinthians 15:20–22.
22. Abraham 3:27.
23. See Joseph B. Wirthlin, “The Time to Prepare,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 14: “As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have a special understanding of the eternal nature of our souls. We know that we had a premortal existence. We accepted our Heavenly Father’s great plan of happiness and chose to follow our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ”; see also “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102: “In the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshiped God as their Eternal Father and *accepted His plan* by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize his or her divine destiny as an heir of eternal life” (emphasis added).

24. See Mormon 9:9.

25. President John Taylor wrote of a covenant being entered into between the Father and the Son in the premortal council. The idea of our entering into a covenant with Christ at that time is contemplated as an extension of this covenant between God and Christ (see John Taylor, *The Mediation and Atonement* [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1882], 97; see also Russell M. Nelson, “Covenants,” *Ensign*, November 2011, 86: “Through the ages, God has made

covenants with His children. His covenants occur *throughout the entire plan of salvation* and are therefore part of the fulness of His gospel. For example, God promised to send a Savior for His children, asking in turn for their obedience to His law” [emphasis added]).

26. See Alma 42:12–15.

27. See Alma 34:11–16.

28. See 2 Nephi 2:8; D. Todd Christofferson, “The Divine Gift of Repentance,” *Ensign*, November 2011, 38: “Repentance exists as an option only because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. It is His infinite sacrifice that ‘bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance’ (Alma 34:15). Repentance is the necessary condition, and the grace of Christ is the power by which ‘mercy can satisfy the demands of justice’ (Alma 34:16).”

29. D&C 19:16–18; emphasis added.

30. See D&C 19:20.

31. See Alma 25:15.

32. Leviticus 6:2–7.

33. See Moses 5:7.

34. D&C 58:43.

35. Luke 15:32.

36. 3 Nephi 9:15–17, 19–20; emphasis added.

37. See Mosiah 3:19.

38. Mosiah 27:26.

39. Isaiah 53:10–11; see also Mosiah 14:10–11.

40. See Mosiah 15.

41. 2 Kings 5:1–14.

42. 2 Kings 5:13.

43. See Numbers 21:9.

44. Helaman 8:15.

45. Matthew 11:28–30.

46. See D&C 18:11.

47. See 2 Nephi 9:7; 25:16; Alma 34:10.

48. See 2 Nephi 9:10, 21; Alma 7:11.

49. D&C 45:3–5; emphasis added.

50. Isaiah 1:18.

51. D&C 58:42.