

The Atonement and Our Part in It

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Tonight I have not come to entertain you; I have come to teach you—to teach you the most important thing I know. I cannot do this, however, without your help. The words and many of the principles I intend to teach you have already heard before. Tonight we approach the season of the celebration of the birth of the Son of God. We join with the rest of the Christian world in observance of His birth at this time. To us He is far more than the Babe born in Bethlehem. I want to teach about the culminating event, the single most important thing He did—the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ—and, for us, equally important, our part in it.

I've done everything I know how to do to prepare for tonight—except to write a talk! That is why I especially need your help. Would you please pray for an outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord? The promise is that if you will do this, we can enjoy a sweet, spiritual experience that will bring great growth. You will be able to understand more than I say. My common words will take on relevance and have meaning. You will gain insights that I will not have explained. The united faith and prayers of this great body can call down from heaven a mighty spiritual power. Will you please pray for that Spirit to come?

Some Basic Principles

I have time to put in place only a few basic principles about the atonement. *No doubt the best part of my effort tonight will be when, in your future thought and study, you will have strokes of insight come that you have not experienced before.*

I call to your mind again the pleading words that the First Stake choir sang so beautifully. Charles Gounod couched in beauty and eloquence the universal plea of all men who finally come to realize their total dependence upon the “Divine Redeemer”:

*Grant me pardon and remember not my sins.
Oh, help me, my Savior.*

When we finally understand that, then we pray for mercy—especially when we realize our dilemma—standing as it were, subject to all the demands of justice.

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Keep in mind that God is just. The law is just. The plan is just. Our part is to learn this and to learn how the plan of mercy operates to free us from the total demands of justice. We can turn to Alma where, nearing the close of his life, this great prophet instructed his young sons.

Corianton did not understand some of these principles we are going to explain tonight. He thought (what many mistakenly think today) that he could “sow his wild oats,” then later be restored to righteousness. In the three preceding chapters (Alma 39–41) his father instructed him in some basic principles. He explained:

1. “Wickedness never was happiness.”

Some never learn that until it is too late.

2. The meaning of the word *restoration*.

Corianton thought he could sow wickedness and reap happiness. That is not restoration. Restoration is evil for evil and good for good, etc.

3. “No unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of God.” It is this fact that causes our dilemma—especially in view of the plan that we were to come to earth, get a body, hear the gospel, and go back to our Father in Heaven.

Alma told Corianton that if we transgress and become unclean, we cannot make it! Keep these thoughts in mind as we go to the scriptures to work out the solution to this dilemma as we “feast on the words of Christ.”

Spiritual and Temporal Death

The forty-second chapter of Alma is one of those difficult ones to understand unless we have some guidance and inspiration. Alma started by talking to his son about the condition of our first parents.

The Lord God sent our first parents forth from the Garden because they had transgressed—they had partaken of the forbidden fruit. The penalty of death was a part of that commandment.

“And now, ye see by this that our first parents were cut off both temporally and spiritu-

ally from the presence of the Lord” (Alma 42:7).

Spiritual death means to be separated from the presence of God the Father. Temporal death means the separation of body and spirit. They died a spiritual death when the Lord thrust them out of the Garden, and they were no longer in His presence. They had previously been under His instruction as He walked and talked with them. Adam experienced temporal death when he was 930 years old—which was “in the day” that the Lord had said he would die.

And thus we see they became subjects to follow after their own will. . . .

And thus we see that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice; yea, the justice of God, which consigned them forever to be cut off from his presence.

And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also.

Then he went on and explained,

Now, how could a man repent except he should sin? How could he sin if there was no law? How could there be a law save there was a punishment?

Then he concluded,

But God ceaseth not to be God, and mercy claimeth the penitent, and mercy cometh because of the atonement; and the atonement bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead; and the resurrection of the dead bringeth back men into the presence of God; and thus they are restored into his presence, to be judged according to their works, according to the law and justice.

For behold, justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own; and

thus, none but the truly penitent are saved. [Alma 42:7, 14–15, 17, 23–24]

The Law of Sacrifice

Let us read the thirty-fourth chapter of Alma, where Amulek, Alma's missionary companion, was teaching. What follows is part of the golden thread woven throughout the scriptures concerning the atonement.

For it is expedient that an atonement should be made; for according to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish; yea, all are hardened; yea, all are fallen and are lost, and must perish except it be through the atonement which it is expedient should be made.

For it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice; yea, not a sacrifice of man, neither of beast, neither of any manner of fowl; for it shall not be a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice. [Alma 34:9–10]

After Adam and Eve were thrust out of the Garden, the Lord commanded them to offer the firstlings of their flock as a sacrifice. Sometime later an angel came and visited them and asked, "Why do you sacrifice?" And Adam said, "I know not, save the Lord commanded me," which is a very good reason. Then the angel explained to him, "This is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth" (Moses 5:6–7).

And so, whenever the gospel was in force and understood, from that day until the Savior Himself was sacrificed, the Lord's covenant people sacrificed the firstlings of their flocks—a ram without blemish—in similitude of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

Alma and others of the prophets who are quoted here knew about the law of sacrifice. They lived under the law. But he was talking about an *infinite* and *eternal* sacrifice.

And that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal.

And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about the means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance.

And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exerciseth no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption. [Alma 34:14–16]

On what basis is this brought about? Let us go to 2 Nephi 9. Jacob spoke these words approximately 545 B.C. They knew of the plan of redemption a long time ago.

For it behooveth the great Creator that he suffereth himself to become subject unto man in the flesh, and die for all men, that all men might become subject unto him.

For as death hath passed upon all men, to fulfill the merciful plan of the great Creator, there must needs be a power of resurrection, and the resurrection must needs come unto man by reason of the fall; and the fall came by reason of transgression; and because man became fallen they were cut off from the presence of the Lord.

Wherefore, it must needs be an infinite atonement. [2 Nephi 9:5–7]

The atonement for man's sins could not be made by man. No man can give his life for another man's sins because we all must die anyway. So whether we die a little earlier or later, it matters not. We learned earlier that an animal could not be sacrificed. It had to be *someone* special. It had to be infinite and eternal. It had to be the Lord, Jesus Christ.

He could do this because He was uniquely qualified. He was born of Mary. From His

mother He inherited mortality, or the power to die. From His Father, God, He inherited immortality, or the power to live forever. The First Begotten in the spirit became the Only Begotten in the flesh. He had the power of resurrection within Him. He could experience death on the cross and after three days walk out of that tomb as the first resurrected being. No other being in the world could do that except the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Resurrection

Then Jacob continued (with good reason):

O how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit. [2 Nephi 9:10]

Because, when He broke the bands of death through resurrection, that made it possible for all men, every creature, to resurrect. The scriptures tell us that when the Savior resurrected, many Saints arose from their graves and appeared unto many (see Matthew 27:52, 53, see also 3 Nephi 23:8–13).

It is a significant thing that when the Savior came to this hemisphere, one of the things He verified was the prophecy that Samuel the Lamanite had made concerning the resurrection of many Saints who had slept. Christ said, “Bring forth the record which ye have kept” (3 Nephi 23:7). They brought forth the records and discovered that the fulfillment had not been recorded. “And it came to pass that Jesus commanded that it should be written; therefore it was written according as he commanded” (3 Nephi 23:13).

Without doubt the Savior wanted this prophecy and its fulfillment recorded in the Book of Mormon, especially in view of future conditions:

And the angel spake unto me, saying: These last records, which thou hast seen among the Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them; and shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people, that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the world; and that all men must come unto him, or they cannot be saved. [1 Nephi 13:40]

We have testimony in the Bible that the resurrection occurred in the Eastern Hemisphere. It is recorded also in the record of the Book of Mormon.

Jacob continued by explaining the conditions of salvation which help us to better understand our part in the atonement: “And he cometh into the world that he may save all men if they will hearken unto his voice” (2 Nephi 9:21). Watch for those conditions. They are critically important if we are to understand justice and mercy, the atonement, and our part in it.

For behold, he suffereth the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam.

And he suffereth this that the resurrection might pass upon all men, that all might stand before him at the great and judgment day. [2 Nephi 9:21–22]

We mortals cannot understand the suffering which the Savior underwent. It is describe for us in our scriptures better than elsewhere, yet we still cannot understand it. There is no pain He did not experience, nor any anguish through which we may pass that He did not know.

And he commandeth all men that they must repent, and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God.

And if they will not repent and believe in his name, and be baptized in his name, and endure to

the end, they must be damned; for the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has spoken it. [2 Nephi 9:23–24]

Let us now go to the nineteenth section of the Doctrine and Covenants, where the Lord explained more fully His suffering. The Lord gave this revelation to Martin Harris. (We need to learn a principle in passing, that when the Lord speaks to one, He speaks to all. He instructed him, and He is instructing us at once.)

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, yea, 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. [D&C 19:15–16]

The Plan of Mercy

On one occasion President Joseph Fielding Smith was my teacher for two weeks on board ship traveling to South America. He was reading this very verse to me. Instead of stopping, however, with the word *repent*, he added, “if they would have faith, repent, be baptized, receive the Holy Ghost, etc., etc.”

“President,” I asked, “where are you reading? My scripture does not say that.”

He got that twinkle in those beautiful blue eyes and with a smile on his face said, “That is what it means; it is supposed to say that.” I now have a corrected version!

What is the gospel of repentance? Surely it is not *just* repentance, is it? Can you see what is beginning to develop?

What is the plan of mercy? Be thinking of another name for the plan of mercy as we continue.

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. [D&C 19:17–18]

Most of you know already that it was in the Garden of Gethsemane that the Lord suffered so greatly and brought about the atonement. Later He was taken to Caiaphas, to the Sanhedrin, to Pilate. During most of the night He was scourged, tortured, beaten; was sentenced and then taken and hung on the cross to die that excruciating death. Other men had been crucified, but they had not atoned for man’s sins. Do you see the difference? He did more than any man has ever done, or all men together. He suffered the pains of all men that He might bring about the atonement.

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. [D&C 19:18–19]

Now, in summary, let us read from 3 Nephi. Here we have a record of the Savior’s visit to this hemisphere. The Savior was instructing His disciples and all the righteous people. He talked about the atonement, and he defined the gospel.

Behold I have given unto you my gospel, and this is the gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me.

And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil—

And for this cause have I been lifted up; therefore, according to the power of the Father I will

draw all men unto me, that they may be judged according to their works.

And it shall come to pass, that whoso repenteth and is baptized in my name shall be filled; and if he endureth to the end, behold, him will I hold guiltless before my Father at that day when I shall stand to judge the world. [3 Nephi 27:13–16]

He emphasized the theme again:

And no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom; therefore nothing entereth into his rest save it be those who have washed their garments in my blood, because of their faith, and the repentance of all their sins, and their faithfulness unto the end. [3 Nephi 27:19]

The Savior paid for our sins through His atonement. We do not need to suffer on condition of our repentance. Question: What do we owe Him?

Can you see that we owe Him everything—love, service, obedience? Do you see why we do a lot of the things that we do? We are *commanded* to do certain things. We are invited to *do many things of our own free will and choice*.

Now this is the commandment: Repent, all ye ends of the earth, and come unto me and be baptized in my name, that ye may be sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost, that ye may stand spotless before me at the last day.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, this is my gospel. [3 Nephi 27:20–21]

Let me ask you that question again. *What is another name for the plan of mercy? The plan of mercy is the gospel of Jesus Christ.* Is that not what we have been talking about all evening?

Steps We Need to Take

The third article of faith says, “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.” The fourth

one says, “we believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.” Those are the first principles and ordinances. But can it be *only* faith, or *only* repentance, or *only* baptism, or *only* the gift of the Holy Ghost? No. No single principle or ordinance will save you. It requires all of these—and more!

Next, all men and women must be endowed in the temple of the Lord. There in those sacred places we receive an endowment of knowledge, of ordinances, of covenants, which, when accepted, understood, and lived, teaches us how to walk back into the presence of our Heavenly Father. You who have been through the temple know what I am talking about. And you who have not do not yet know how to walk into the presence of your Heavenly Father. Everybody that is going to get into our Father’s presence simply must do that.

Next, we must be sealed to our companions in eternal marriage in order to get back into the presence of our Heavenly Father and become like Him. I am reminding you of the things you already know. I am trying to put them in proper context, so that you will understand that all these things pertain to the central theme of the gospel—the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ—and what we must do to partake of that atonement.

The Savior said to Moses, “This is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). All of us know what many of the people of the world do not—that immortality and eternal life are two different things. The resurrection of the Master brought about the resurrection of every creature. All people will live again whether they have faith in Him or whether they do not.

Eternal life is the quality of existence in the presence of our Heavenly Father which comes

upon conditions we have explained. We must earn it by obedience. The plan of mercy pays justice its due, and the Lord can still be just. Mercy can pay for our sins—upon conditions of our acceptance and our doing what we should. The dilemma has been overcome by the Savior—our part is to accept Him and to be obedient.

I understand that next week is test week. I suppose that you are all mature enough to know that in reality test week is every week! The adversary has taught, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die.” (I wish that thought were dead, but it is not!)

The Savior has taught that we are in a test all of the time. That is the purpose of our coming here. We came here to get a body and to see if “they will do all thing whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:25).

This is our test. “Test week” only intensifies things. Do not complain about that. Understand its place and know that we qualify by obedience. “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). In our modern scriptures it says, “And my people must needs be chastened until they learn obedience, if it must needs be, by the things which they suffer” (D&C 105:6). Obedience is the only way back into our Father’s presence. We can have less than exaltation without it, but we cannot have eternal life.

The Church has three great missions. All are a direct outgrowth of the atonement—to proclaim the gospel, perfect the Saints, and redeem the dead.

This gospel plan is for every one of our Father’s children. Why do you young men need to fill missions? Why must we reach out to our neighbors? They must have an opportunity to hear the gospel and undergo the ordinances that put them on the pathway to perfection.

Why must we redeem the dead? Why do genealogical research? To save the billions on the other side of the veil, who did not have a chance to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ or undergo the saving ordinances. Modern revelation teaches that they are there. The work is organized and going forward among our Father’s children. You and I will have the opportunity to perform the essential ordinances for many people. All during the millennium we will be involved in this supernal work of saving and exalting all of those who will.

Our opportunity is to participate in the gospel of Jesus Christ. For your time and age you have done all you are supposed to do. Now endure! Do not turn away from the Lord because you err—especially if you err. The gift of repentance is to help us straighten out our lives, to get cleaned up so that we can get back into His presence.

Nearly everything I have told you tonight comes from the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. These modern scriptures will lead men and women into the celestial kingdom of our Father.

I bear witness that God lives, that He is our Father, that He loves us enough to send His Only Begotten Son to the earth to die for our sins and to purchase us. I bear witness that Jesus is the Christ, the literal Son of God, our Savior and our Redeemer. He redeemed us through His atonement. I bear witness that Joseph was a prophet. These modern scriptures are the evidence. We are led by a living prophet, President Spencer W. Kimball, today. May our Heavenly Father bless all of you with increased understanding and knowledge of the atonement and what we must do in appreciation for the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ—in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.