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The Divine Gift of Repentance

Only through repentance do we gain access to the atoning grace of Jesus Christ.

The Book of Mormon contains the account of a man named Nehor. It is easy to understand why Mormon, in abridging a thousand years of Nephite records, thought it important to include something about this man and the enduring influence of his doctrine. Mormon was seeking to warn us, knowing that this philosophy would surface again in our day.

Nehor appeared on the scene about 90 years before the birth of Christ. He taught “that all mankind should be saved at the last day, . . . for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life” (Alma 1:4).

About 15 years later, Korihor came among the Nephites preaching and amplifying the doctrine of Nehor. The Book of Mormon records that “he was Anti-Christ, for he began to preach unto the people against the prophecies . . . concerning the coming of Christ” (Alma 30:6). Korihor’s preaching was to the effect “that there could be no atonement made for the sins of men, but every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man

prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength; and whatsoever a man did was no crime” (Alma 30:17). These false prophets and their followers “did not believe in the repentance of their sins” (Alma 15:15).

As in the days of Nehor and Korihor, we live in a time not long before the advent of Jesus Christ—in our case, the time of preparation for His Second Coming. And similarly, the message of repentance is often not welcomed. Some profess that if there is a God, He makes no real demands upon us (see Alma 18:5). Others maintain that a loving God forgives all sin based on simple confession, or if there actually is a punishment for sin, “God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God” (2 Nephi 28:8). Others, with Korihor, deny the very existence of Christ and any such thing as sin. Their doctrine is that values, standards, and even truth are all relative. Thus, whatever one feels is right for him or her cannot be judged by others to be wrong or sinful.

On the surface such philosophies seem appealing because they give

us license to indulge any appetite or desire without concern for consequences. By using the teachings of Nehor and Korihor, we can rationalize and justify anything. When prophets come crying repentance, it “throws cold water on the party.” But in reality the prophetic call should be received with joy. Without repentance, there is no real progress or improvement in life. Pretending there is no sin does not lessen its burden and pain. Suffering for sin does not by itself change anything for the better. Only repentance leads to the sunlit uplands of a better life. And, of course, only through repentance do we gain access to the atoning grace of Jesus Christ and salvation. Repentance is a divine gift, and there should be a smile on our faces when we speak of it. It points us to freedom, confidence, and peace. Rather than interrupting the celebration, the gift of repentance is the cause for true celebration.

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). Our witness is this:

“We know that justification [or forgiveness of sins] through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true;

“And we know also, that sanctification [or purification from the effects of sin] through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true, to all those who love and serve God with all their might, minds, and strength” (D&C 20:30–31).

Repentance is an expansive subject, but today I would like to mention just

five aspects of this fundamental gospel principle that I hope will be helpful.

First, the invitation to repent is an expression of love. When the Savior “began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17), it was a message of love, inviting all who would to qualify to join Him “and enjoy the words of eternal life in this world, and eternal life [itself] in the world to come” (Moses 6:59). If we do not invite others to change or if we do not demand repentance of ourselves, we fail in a fundamental duty we owe to one another and to ourselves. A permissive parent, an indulgent friend, a fearful Church leader are in reality more concerned about themselves than the welfare and happiness of those they could help. Yes, the call to repentance is at times regarded as intolerant or offensive and may even be resented, but guided by the Spirit, it is in reality an act of genuine caring (see D&C 121:43–44).

Second, repentance means striving to change. It would mock the Savior’s suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross for us to expect that He should transform us into angelic beings with no real effort on our part. Rather, we seek His grace to complement and reward our most diligent efforts (see 2 Nephi 25:23). Perhaps as much as praying for mercy, we should pray for time and opportunity to work and strive and overcome. Surely the Lord smiles upon one who desires to come to judgment worthily, who resolutely labors day by day to replace weakness with strength. Real repentance, real change may require repeated attempts, but there is something refining and holy in such striving. Divine forgiveness and healing flow quite naturally to such a soul, for indeed “virtue loveth virtue; light



cleaveth unto light; [and] mercy hath compassion on mercy and claimeth her own” (D&C 88:40).

With repentance we can steadily improve in our capacity to live the celestial law, for we recognize that “he who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory” (D&C 88:22).

Third, repentance means not only abandoning sin but also committing to obedience. The Bible Dictionary states, “Repentance comes to mean a turning of the heart and will to God, [as well as] a renunciation of sin to which we are naturally inclined.”¹ One of several examples of this teaching from the Book of Mormon is found in the words of Alma to one of his sons:

“Therefore I command you, my son, in the fear of God, that ye refrain from your iniquities;

“That ye turn to the Lord with all

your mind, might, and strength” (Alma 39:12–13; see also Mosiah 7:33; 3 Nephi 20:26; Mormon 9:6).

For our turning to the Lord to be complete, it must include nothing less than a covenant of obedience to Him. We often speak of this covenant as the baptismal covenant since it is witnessed by being baptized in water (see Mosiah 18:10). The Savior’s own baptism, providing the example, confirmed His covenant of obedience to the Father. “But notwithstanding he being holy, he showeth unto the children of men that, according to the flesh he humbleth himself before the Father, and witnesseth unto the Father that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments” (2 Nephi 31:7). Without this covenant, repentance remains incomplete and the remission of sins unattained.² In the memorable expression of Professor



Noel Reynolds, “The choice to repent is a choice to burn bridges in every direction [having determined] to follow forever only *one* way, the *one* path that leads to eternal life.”³

Fourth, repentance requires a seriousness of purpose and a willingness to persevere, even through pain. Attempts to create a list of specific steps of repentance may be helpful to some, but it may also lead to a mechanical, check-off-the-boxes approach with no real feeling or change. True repentance is not superficial. The Lord gives two overarching requirements: “By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them” (D&C 58:43).

Confessing and forsaking are powerful concepts. They are much more than a casual “I admit it; I’m sorry.” Confession is a deep, sometimes agonizing acknowledgment of error and offense to God and man. Sorrow and regret and bitter tears often accompany one’s confession, especially when his or her actions have been the cause of pain to someone or, worse, have led another into sin. It is this deep distress, this view of things as they really are, that leads one, as Alma, to cry out, “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death” (Alma 36:18).

With faith in the merciful Redeemer and His power, potential despair turns to hope. One’s very heart and desires change, and the once-appealing sin becomes increasingly abhorrent. A resolve to abandon and forsake the sin and to repair, as fully as one possibly can, the damage he or she has caused now forms in that new heart. This resolve soon matures into a covenant of obedience to God. With that covenant in place, the Holy Ghost, the messenger of divine grace, will bring relief and forgiveness. One is moved to declare again with Alma, “And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I [do] behold; yea, my soul [is] filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!” (Alma 36:20).

Any pain entailed in repentance will always be far less than the suffering required to satisfy justice for unresolved transgression. The Savior spoke little about what He endured to satisfy the demands of justice and atone for our sins, but He did make this revealing statement:

“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” (D&C 19:16–18).

Fifth, whatever the cost of repentance, it is swallowed up in the joy of forgiveness. In a general conference address entitled “The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness,” President Boyd K. Packer provided this analogy:

“In April of 1847, Brigham Young led the first company of pioneers out of Winter Quarters. At that same time, 1,600 miles [2,575 km] to the west the pathetic survivors of the Donner Party straggled down the slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains into the Sacramento Valley.

“They had spent the ferocious winter trapped in the snowdrifts below the summit. That any survived the days and weeks and months of starvation and indescribable suffering is almost beyond belief.

“Among them was fifteen-year-old John Breen. On the night of April 24 he walked into Johnson’s Ranch. Years later John wrote:

“It was long after dark when we got to Johnson’s Ranch, so the first time I saw it was early in the morning. The weather was fine, the ground was covered with green grass, the birds were singing from the tops of the trees, and the journey was over. I could scarcely believe that I was alive.

“The scene that I saw that morning seems to be photographed on my mind. Most of the incidents are gone from memory, but I can always see the camp near Johnson’s Ranch.”

Said President Packer: “At first I was very puzzled by his statement that ‘most of the incidents are gone from memory.’ How could long months of incredible suffering and sorrow ever be gone from his mind? How could that brutal dark winter be replaced with one brilliant morning?

“On further reflection I decided it was not puzzling at all. I have seen

something similar happen to people I have known. I have seen some who have spent a long winter of guilt and spiritual starvation emerge into the morning of forgiveness. When morning came, they learned this:

“Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more” [D&C 58:42].⁴

I gratefully acknowledge and testify that the incomprehensible suffering, death, and Resurrection of our Lord “bringeth to pass the condition of repentance” (Helaman 14:18). The divine gift of repentance is the key to happiness here and hereafter. In the Savior’s words and in deep humility and love, I invite all to “repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). I know that in accepting this invitation, you will find joy both now and forever. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■

NOTES

1. Bible Dictionary, “Repentance.”
2. The Book of Mormon speaks repeatedly of being “baptized unto repentance” (see Mosiah 26:22; Alma 5:62; 6:2; 7:14; 8:10; 9:27; 48:19; 49:30; Helaman 3:24; 5:17, 19; 3 Nephi 1:23; 7:24–26; Moroni 8:11). John the Baptist used the same words (see Matthew 3:11), and Paul spoke of the “baptism of repentance” (Acts 19:4). The phrase appears in the Doctrine and Covenants as well (see Doctrine and Covenants 35:5; 107:20). “Baptism of or unto repentance” simply references the fact that baptism with its covenant of obedience is the capstone of repentance. With full repentance, including baptism, one is qualified for the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, and it is by the Holy Ghost that one receives the baptism of the Spirit (see John 3:5) and forgiveness of sins: “For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water; and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 31:17).
3. Noel B. Reynolds, “The True Points of My Doctrine,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1996): 35; emphasis added.
4. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, Oct. 1995, 21; see also “The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 18.



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Perfect Love Casteth Out Fear

If you will respond to the invitation to share your beliefs and feelings about the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, a spirit of love and a spirit of courage will be your constant companion.

President Monson, we are all thrilled with the exciting news of some new temples. Especially it was exciting for my many, many relatives in the state of Wyoming.

The Church does something throughout the world when a new temple is built that is a fairly common tradition in the United States and Canada—we hold an open house. During the weeks just prior to the dedication of a new temple, we open the doors and invite local government and religious leaders, local members of the Church, and persons of other faiths to come and tour our newly constructed temple.

These are wonderful events that help people unfamiliar with the Church learn a little more about it. Nearly everyone who visits a new temple marvels at both its exterior and interior beauty. They are impressed by the craftsmanship and attention to detail in every feature of a temple. Moreover, many of the visitors feel something unique and special as they are guided through the undedicated temple. These are common responses of visitors to our open houses, but

they are not the most common response. What impresses more visitors than anything else is the members of the Church they meet at our open houses. They leave forever impressed with their hosts, the Latter-day Saints.

The Church is receiving more attention across the world than ever before. Members of the media write or talk about the Church every day, reporting on its many activities. Many of the most prominent news outlets in the United States regularly discuss the Church or its members. These discussions extend across the globe as well.

The Church also attracts attention on the Internet, which, as you know, has dramatically changed the way people share information. At all times of the day across the entire world, the Church and its teachings are being discussed on the Internet, on blogs and social networks, by people who have never written for a newspaper or a magazine. They are making videos and sharing them online. These are ordinary people—both members of our faith and of other faiths—who are talking about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.