

A Longing for Peace

NAME WITHHELD

Could the Atonement really heal a heart broken by abuse and take away the bitterness I had felt for so long?

What role has the Atonement played in all of this?" The question came as I sat waiting for my husband in the foyer of the stake offices. I was visiting with the second counselor in the stake presidency, and I shared with him some of the events that had taken place in my life. I grew up in an abusive atmosphere. Pornography was a common vice among the men in our home, and its effects were far-reaching. My father was involved in homosexual activities. He was also physically and emotionally abusive, particularly to my mother, while my brother was sexually abusive to my sisters and me. I lived in constant fear and turmoil during my childhood years. Although the situation changed dramatically with my parents' divorce when I was 12 years old, I spent the bulk of my teenage years trying to deal with a haunting sense of worthlessness.

After leaving home and getting married, I found that my close relationships were being affected by the abuse I had suffered as a child. I sought help from many sources, but healing was slow in coming.

My sharing the experiences that I had gone through in my quest for peace prompted the second counselor's question about the Atonement. But just as he posed it,

we were interrupted, and our conversation was over. My husband and I returned home, but I couldn't get the discussion out of my mind. The question was one that I had spent much time pondering. What role *had* the Atonement played in my life?

Feelings of Inadequacy

For many years I didn't even want to discuss the Atonement. I was confused, bitter, and angry. I did not feel worthy to approach Heavenly Father about my feelings, and I suffered from a deep sense of inadequacy. I couldn't imagine that Heavenly Father or the Savior would want to have anything to do with me.

Besides that, in my mind the abuse had somehow become my fault, and I didn't know how to get rid of the guilt that was so prevalent in my life. My anger was not directed toward the Lord so much as it was toward the situation in which I found myself: through a series of events that I did not choose, I felt I had become unworthy of feeling close to Him.

Fortunately, I had enough experience with the Spirit that I knew the gospel was true and I couldn't deny my testimony. Although I had many questions resulting from



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the things I had gone through, I never felt inclined to abandon the Church. Looking back, I know Heavenly Father sent some amazing people to be a part of my life, to help guide me on the difficult road I had to travel. I had a compassionate Beehive adviser, a wonderful seminary teacher, an institute director who took the time to answer many questions, a therapist who was willing to listen to my ranting and raving and then walk me step-by-step through the healing process, and a mother who never wavered in her testimony. Most important, I was blessed with an incredible husband who has supported me through some difficult times and helped me to heal from some very deep wounds. But the healing came only after some additional challenges.

Seeking Help

After years of struggling with my self-worth, I realized I needed help. I sought out a therapist who was also a member of the Church. In our first session together, he pulled out the scriptures, and I got a lesson on forgiveness. I left that session fuming! I didn't want to hear about forgiveness—I wanted a way to bring peace back into my life! After a year of meeting with him, I quit going. I wasn't making any progress, and I was tired of feeling guilty for not being able to forgive my father and my brother.

My husband and I had two children by that time. During that period, we were struggling with issues in our marriage directly related to the abuse I had experienced at the hands of my brother. I was suffering from severe

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depression, and our oldest child was experiencing significant medical problems. Life had become sheer drudgery, and I couldn't see that it was ever going to get any better. I felt as if I were living in a black hole.

It took several years before my husband finally convinced me to go back to a counselor. The woman I worked with the second time took a more subtle approach to the counseling process. She was wonderful, but I still didn't make a lot of progress because of my bitterness and anger, and I simply was not willing to talk about the Atonement. It was only when I went to a conference at Brigham Young University and attended a workshop about healing from abuse that I



CONTROL THE CHANGE FOR GOOD IN YOUR LIFE

“The wicked choice of others cannot completely destroy your agency unless you permit it. Their acts may cause pain, anguish, even physical harm, but they cannot destroy your eternal possibilities in this brief but crucial life on earth. You must understand that you are free to determine to overcome the harmful results of abuse. Your attitude can control the change for good in your life. It allows you to have the help the Lord intends you to receive. No one can take away your ultimate opportunities when you understand and live eternal law. The laws of your Heavenly Father and the Atonement of the Lord have made it possible that you will not be robbed of the opportunities which come to the children of God.”

Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Healing the Tragic Scars of Abuse,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 31–32.

began to have a new understanding of what the Atonement really was.

Until then, my understanding of the Atonement was limited to repentance and forgiveness. I had been an active member of the Church all of my life—graduating from seminary, participating in institute, serving in a variety of callings, and raising my family to live by gospel standards—but I had never really understood the *healing* power of the Atonement. I had no idea how personal and penetrating it could be, no idea that it could heal my broken heart and take away the pain and hurt and anger and bitterness that I had been feeling for so many years.

Oh, how I wish I had understood that



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Turning to the Savior

It took some time to work through the issues that I was dealing with, but I began to feel peace in my life. Through my understanding of the Atonement, I was able to move past the crippling image I had created of myself and develop relationships with my family.

It was at this point that I had the previously mentioned discussion with the counselor in the stake presidency. It left me wondering if I had taken full advantage of the Atonement. For many years I had blamed my youthful mistakes on the fact that I had been abused. There were some unresolved sins in my life that I knew I needed to repent of in order to be completely healed. Moreover, I felt that my own repentance process was hinging on whether or not I could finally and completely forgive my father and my brother.

After some intense prayer and scripture study, I came to understand what I had to do to be healed from the wounds that had been inflicted on me. I spent several weeks

ABOVE LEFT, DETAIL FROM CHRISTUS STATUE BY ALBERT BERTEL THORVAADSEN, PHOTOGRAPH BY ALDO BERECHI; ABOVE RIGHT, PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY J. SCOTT KNUDSEN, PHOTOGRAPH BY CRAIG DIMOND; PAINTING, NOT MY WILL, BUT THINE, BE DONE, BY HARRY ANDERSON

The atoning sacrifice of our Savior allows me to lay my burdens at His feet and be free from the effects of others' sins.



tracking down people from my past that I had wronged in some way and trying to make restitution as best I could. It was not easy, but I knew that I was moving in the right direction in correcting things in my life. Once I was able to own *my* sins and quit blaming them on those who had hurt me, I was able to really let them go, to turn them over to the Lord and fully repent. Once again, I was amazed at the power of the Atonement to heal my soul and give me the strength to come unto the Savior.

The Reach of the Atonement

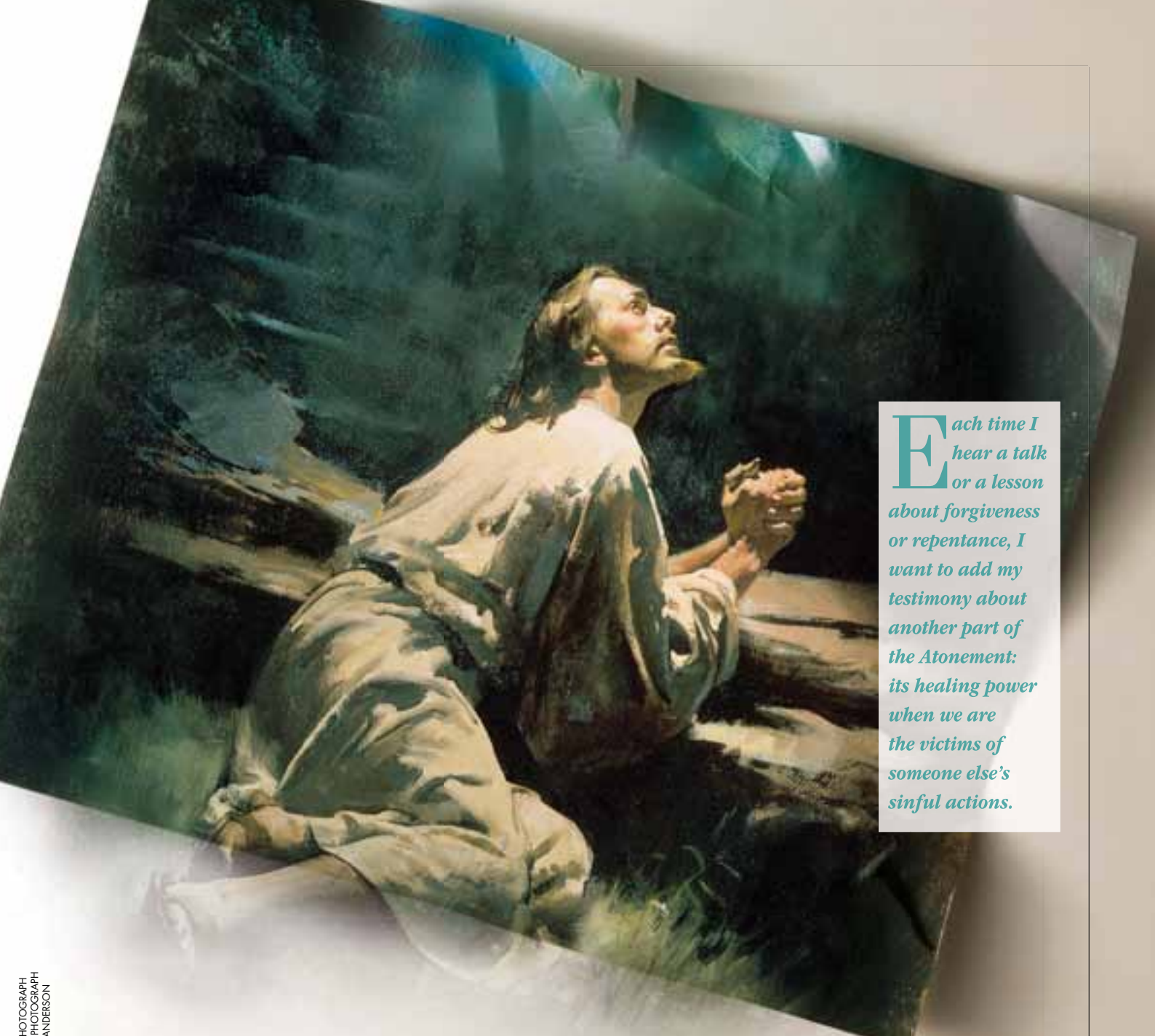
Possibly the most amazing thing about this process has been watching the Lord

work in my life. He has consistently placed me in situations that have led me to stretch myself and grow closer to Him. After talking to my stake priesthood leader and hearing his counsel, after visiting with my bishop and confessing my own sins, after contacting people I had not seen in 20 years and begging forgiveness from them, how could I not forgive those who had hurt me? The process of repenting reminded me that the power of the Atonement is not just for me but also for those who have committed sins against me. It is for the abused and the abuser alike.

No one heals from this type of abuse overnight. In fact, getting to the point in my life where I felt I could forgive those who had sinned against me took more than 20 years—20 years of *actively* trying to understand why these things had taken place and how I could get past them. It has been a long process to learn how to “come unto Christ,” but through that process, I have finally been able to allow Him to become, quite literally, my Savior and His grace was sufficient for me (see Moroni 10:30, 32).

I still have days when I struggle and wonder why I have had to deal with these things in my life. Even though I never would have chosen these experiences, I am grateful for my understanding of the Atonement and for the healing I have felt.

I know there are many people who are in the same situation that I was in for so many years. They are longing for something that will bring them peace but have no idea where to turn. The answer is simple and is talked about often in the Church, but for some reason, it never seemed to apply to my situation. Now, each time I hear a talk or a lesson about forgiveness or repentance, I want to add my



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testimony about another part of the Atonement: its healing power when we are the victims of someone else's sinful actions. It is something very close to my heart.

I have thought often about the question the member of the stake presidency posed to me: "What role has the Atonement played in all of this?" As I have learned to apply the Atonement on a daily basis through prayer, scripture study, and increased temple attendance, I have found that I can be at peace with the things in my life over which I have no control. The atoning sacrifice of our Savior allows me to lay my burdens at His feet and be free from the effects of others' sins. It has also made it possible

for me to experience true joy and happiness.

I love the Savior and am so grateful for His life and His Atonement. It is amazing to me that He was not only willing but also able to take on all of our imperfections (see Alma 7:11–13). I can't even begin to comprehend the suffering that He went through for each one of us. It is my testimony of Him that gives me hope each day and makes my life worth living. ■

LDS Family Services offers counseling and other resources to people who have been affected by abuse in any way. If you feel some of your actions toward family members have been questionable, help is also available for you. For more information, contact the LDS Family Services office in your area or visit www.ldsfamilyservices.org.

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