

The Atonement of Jesus Christ



The Atonement of the Only Begotten Son of God is the crucial foundation upon which all Christian doctrine rests and the greatest expression of divine love this world has ever been given.

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In the Garden of Gethsemane

As a young missionary, Elder Orson F. Whitney (1855–1931), who later served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, had a dream so powerful that it changed his life forever. He later wrote:

“One night I dreamed . . . that I was in the Garden of Gethsemane, a witness of the Savior’s agony. . . . I stood behind a tree in the foreground. . . . Jesus, with Peter, James, and John, came through a little wicket gate at my right. Leaving the three Apostles there, after telling them to kneel and pray, He passed over to the other side, where He also knelt and prayed . . . : ‘Oh my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not as I will but as Thou wilt.’”





stature and of majestic mien . . . the very God that He was and is, yet as meek and lowly as a little child.

“All at once the circumstance seemed to change. . . . Instead of before, it was after the Crucifixion, and

“As He prayed the tears streamed down His face, which was [turned] toward me.

I was so moved at the sight that I wept also, out of pure sympathy with His great sorrow. My whole heart went out to Him. I loved Him with all my soul and longed to be with Him as I longed for nothing else.

“Presently He arose and walked to where those Apostles were kneeling—fast asleep! He shook them gently, awoke them, and in a tone of tender reproach, untinged by the least show of anger or scolding, asked them if they could not watch with Him one hour. . . .

“Returning to His place, He prayed again and then went back and found them again sleeping. Again He awoke them, admonished them, and returned and prayed as before. Three times this happened, until I was perfectly familiar with His appearance—face, form, and movements. He was of noble

the Savior, with those three Apostles, now stood together in a group at my left. They were about to depart and ascend into heaven. I could endure it no longer. I ran from behind the tree, fell at His feet, clasped Him around the knees, and begged Him to take me with Him.

“I shall never forget the kind and gentle manner in which He stooped and raised me up and embraced me. It was so vivid, so real that I felt the very warmth of His bosom against which I rested. Then He said: ‘No, my son; these have finished their work, and they may go with me; but you must stay and finish yours.’ Still I clung to Him. Gazing up into His face—for He was taller than I—I besought Him most



Why an Atonement?

This tender, personal glimpse of the Savior's loving sacrifice is a fitting introduction to the significance of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Indeed the Atonement of the Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh is the crucial foundation upon

The Atonement was indispensable because the Fall of Adam brought two kinds of death into the world.

earnestly: 'Well, promise me that I will come to You at the last.' He smiled sweetly and tenderly and replied: 'That will depend entirely upon yourself.' I awoke with a sob in my throat, and it was morning."¹

which all Christian doctrine rests and the greatest expression of divine love this world has ever been given. Its importance in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints cannot be overstated. Every other principle, commandment, and virtue of the restored gospel draws its significance from this pivotal event.²

The Atonement was the foreordained but voluntary act of the Only Begotten Son of God in which He offered His life and spiritual anguish as a redeeming ransom for the effect of the Fall of Adam upon all mankind and for the personal sins of all who repent.

The literal meaning of the English word *Atonement* is self-evident: at-one-ment, the bringing together of things that have been



separated or estranged. The Atonement of Jesus Christ was indispensable because of the separating transgression, or Fall, of Adam, which brought two kinds of death into the world when Adam and Eve partook of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.³ Physical death brought the separation of the spirit from the body, and spiritual death brought the estrangement of both the spirit and the body from God. As a result of the Fall, all persons born into mortality would suffer these two kinds of death. But we must remember the Fall was an essential part of Heavenly Father's divine plan. Without it no mortal children would have been born to Adam and Eve, and there would have been no human family to experience opposition and growth, moral agency, and the joy of resurrection, redemption, and eternal life.⁴

The need for this Fall and for an atonement to compensate for it was explained in a premortal Council in Heaven at which the spirits of the entire human family attended and over which God the Father presided. It was in this premortal setting that Christ volunteered to honor the moral agency of all humankind even as He atoned for their sins. In the process, He would return to the Father all glory for such redemptive love.⁵

This infinite Atonement of Christ was possible because (1) He was the only sinless man ever to live on this earth and therefore was not subject to the spiritual death resulting from sin, (2) He was the Only Begotten of the Father

LIVING BY HIS SIDE

The Lord held out His hand to me almost five years ago, and the gospel changed my life. Thanks to His Atonement, I was redeemed from the choices of the past and was able to feel in my heart the miracle of forgiveness.

Jesus Christ accompanies and strengthens us each day if we are worthy. Not only are our sins erased and forgotten, but His light radiates in our personal and professional lives.

He is our Savior, the Son of God. His love is infinite. If we live as He would have us live, we will share His love and have the hope of returning to live with Him and our Heavenly Father forever.

Marie Monjusan, France

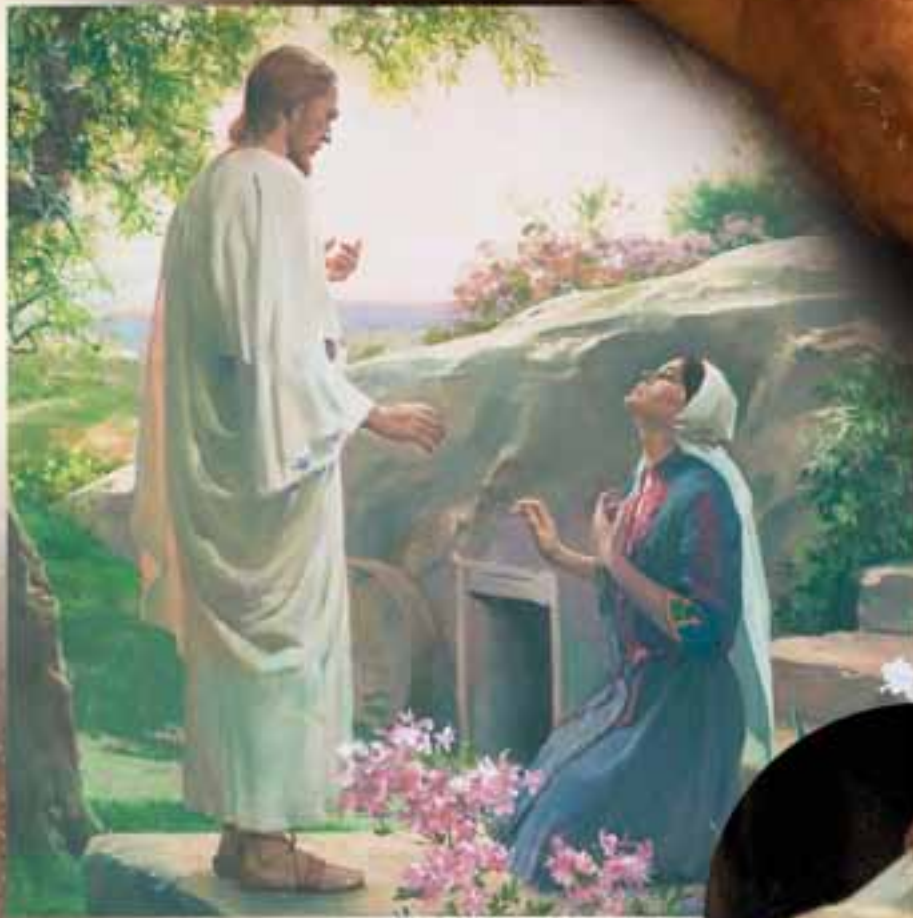


and therefore possessed the attributes of godhood that gave Him power over physical death,⁶ and (3) He was apparently the only one sufficiently humble and willing in the premortal council to be fore-ordained to that service.⁷

The Gifts of Christ's Atonement

Some gifts coming from the Atonement are universal, infinite, and unconditional. These include His ransom for Adam's original transgression so that no member of the human family is held responsible for that sin.⁸ Another universal gift is the Resurrection from the dead of every man, woman, and child who lives, has ever lived, or ever will live on earth.

Other aspects of Christ's atoning gift are conditional. They depend on one's diligence in keeping God's commandments. For example, while all members of the human family are freely given a reprieve from Adam's sin through no effort of their own, they are not given a reprieve from their own sins unless they pledge faith in Christ, repent of those sins, are baptized in His name, receive the gift of the Holy Ghost and confirmation into Christ's Church, and press forward in faithful endurance the remainder of life's journey. Of this personal challenge, Christ said, "For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent;



The Resurrection of the body is a free and universal gift, a result of the Savior's victory over death. It is one of the unconditional blessings available through the grace of Christ.

“But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I.”⁹

Furthermore, although the Resurrection of the body is a free and universal gift from Christ, a result of His victory over death, the nature of the resurrected body (or “degree of glory” given it), as well as the time of one’s Resurrection, is affected directly by one’s faithfulness in this life. The Apostle Paul made clear, for example, that those fully committed to Christ will “rise first”¹⁰ in the Resurrection. Modern revelation clarifies the different orders of resurrected bodies,¹¹ promising the highest degree of glory only to those who adhere to the principles and ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹²

Of course neither the unconditional nor the

conditional blessings of the Atonement are available except through the grace of Christ.

Obviously the unconditional blessings of the Atonement are unearned, but the conditional ones are not fully merited either. By living faithfully and keeping the commandments of God, one can receive additional

privileges; but they are still given

freely, not technically earned. The Book of Mormon declares emphatically that “there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah.”¹³

By this same grace, God provides for the salvation of little children, the mentally impaired, those who lived without hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ, and so forth: these are redeemed by the universal power of the Atonement of Christ and will have the





opportunity to receive the fulness of the gospel after death, in the spirit world, where spirits reside while awaiting the Resurrection.¹⁴

Suffering and Triumph

To begin to meet the demands of the Atonement, the sinless Christ went into the Garden of Gethsemane, as Elder Whitney saw in his dream, there to bear the agony of soul only He could bear. He “began to be sore amazed and to be very heavy,” saying to Peter, James, and John, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, unto death.”¹⁵ Why? Because He suffered “the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam.”¹⁶ He experienced “temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great [was] his anguish.”¹⁷

ANTICIPATING THE RESURRECTION

When my dear wife returned home to our Heavenly Father, it was necessary for our family to find a suitable grave site. In doing so, I faced opposition when I wanted to have the term *resting place* included on the gravestone. The term did not meet the cemetery management’s policy.

Thus ensued a tenacious struggle. At one point the minister of the church to which the cemetery grounds belonged asked about the term. I was able to bear my testimony that I believe in the literal resurrection of the body, quoting the Savior: “All that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life” (John 5:28–29). I testified that this grave is a sacred resting place for us until the Resurrection.

Then the minister made an inspired suggestion. “Have the following words inscribed on the gravestone: ‘The Bohne and Lehmann families are resting here in anticipation of the Resurrection.’” So it was done. And with that, my testimony was chiseled in stone.

Rudolf Lehmann, Germany

Through this suffering, Jesus redeemed the souls of all men, women, and children “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.”¹⁸ In doing so, Christ “descended below all things”—including every kind of sickness, infirmity, and dark despair experienced by every mortal being—in order that He might “comprehend all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth.”¹⁹

The utter loneliness and excruciating pain of the Atonement begun in Gethsemane reached its zenith when, after unspeakable abuse at the hands of Roman soldiers and others, Christ cried from the cross, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”²⁰ In the depths of

that anguish, even nature itself convulsed.

“There was a darkness over all the earth. . . .

And the sun was darkened.”²¹ “And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom;

and the earth did

quake, and the

rocks rent,”²²

causing many to exclaim, “The God of nature



suffers.”²³ Finally, even the seemingly unbearable had been borne, and Jesus said, “It is finished.”²⁴ “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”²⁵ Someday, somewhere, every human tongue will be called upon to confess as did a Roman centurion who witnessed all of this, “Truly this was the Son of God.”²⁶

To the thoughtful woman and man, it is “a matter of surpassing wonder”²⁷ that the voluntary and merciful sacrifice of a single being could satisfy the infinite and eternal demands of justice, atone for every human transgression and misdeed, and thereby sweep all humankind into the encompassing arms of His merciful embrace. But so it is.

To quote President John Taylor (1808–87): “In a manner to us incomprehensible and inexplicable, He bore the weight of the sins of the whole world; not only of Adam, but of his posterity; and in doing that, opened the kingdom of heaven, not only to all believers and all who obeyed the law of God, but to more than one-half of the human family who die before they come to years of maturity, as well as to [those] who . . . [die] without [the] law.”²⁸

As Elder Whitney felt regarding this majestic gift and the giver of it, may we so feel: “I was so moved at the [gift] that I wept . . . out of pure sympathy. My whole heart went out to Him. I loved Him with all my soul and longed to be with Him as I longed for nothing else.” Having already offered the Atonement in our behalf, Christ has done His part to make that longing a reality. The rest will depend entirely upon ourselves. ■

THE SAVIOR'S MERCIFUL EMBRACE

I have struggled throughout my life with feelings of failure, of not being good enough. But I have discovered that the gospel of Jesus Christ is an antidote to these feelings.

Because of the Atonement, the Savior understands my fears, and He comforts me through the Holy Ghost. He knows my weaknesses, and He helps me to overcome them. He has never left me alone, but He has strengthened me and expanded my heart.

I may never measure up by the world's standards, but I feel valued, worthwhile, and loved when I do my best to live the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Susan Lunt, Utah, USA



NOTES

1. “The Divinity of Jesus Christ,” *Improvement Era*, Jan. 1926, 224–25; see also *Liabona*, Dec. 2003, 16; *Ensign*, Dec. 2003, 10; punctuation, capitalization, and spelling standardized.
2. See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 49.
3. See Genesis 2:9; 3.
4. See 2 Nephi 2:22–27; Moses 5:11.
5. See Revelation 13:8; Moses 4:1–2; Abraham 3:22–27.
6. See John 5:26–29; 2 Nephi 9:5–12; Alma 34:9–14.
7. See James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 3rd ed. (1916), 21–22.
8. See Articles of Faith 1:2.
9. D&C 19:16–17.
10. 1 Thessalonians 4:16.
11. See D&C 76:50–113; compare 1 Corinthians 15:40–42.
12. See D&C 76:50–70; 88:4, 27–29; 132:21–24.
13. 2 Nephi 2:8.
14. See Alma 40:11; D&C 138; compare Luke 23:43; John 5:25.
15. Mark 14:33–34.
16. 2 Nephi 9:21.
17. Mosiah 3:7.
18. Alma 7:12.
19. D&C 88:6.
20. Matthew 27:46.
21. Luke 23:44–45.
22. Matthew 27:51.
23. 1 Nephi 19:12.
24. John 19:30.
25. Luke 23:46.
26. Matthew 27:54.
27. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 12th ed. (1924), 77.
28. *The Mediation and Atonement* (1882), 148–49; capitalization standardized.