

What Does the Atonement Mean to You?

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The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.”¹

These fundamental principles are grounded in the Atonement of Jesus Christ. The word *Atonement* “describes the setting ‘at one’ of those who have been estranged, and denotes the reconciliation of man to God. Sin is the cause of the estrangement, and therefore the purpose of atonement is to correct or overcome the consequences of sin.”² I believe it is also possible to become estranged from God for many reasons other than overt sin.

The risks of our becoming distant from our Father in Heaven and the Savior are significant and constantly around us. Happily, the Atonement was meant for all of these situations as well. That is why Jacob, the brother of Nephi, described the Atonement as “infinite” (2 Nephi 9:7), meaning without limitations or externally imposed constraints. That is why the Atonement is so remarkable and so necessary. Little wonder, then, that we

not only need to appreciate this incomparable gift but also to understand it clearly.

Jesus Christ was the only one capable of performing the magnificent Atonement because He was the only perfect man and the Only Begotten Son of God the Father. He received His commission for this essential work from His Father before the world was established. His perfect mortal life devoid of sin, the shedding of His blood, His suffering in the garden and upon the cross, His voluntary death, and the Resurrection of His body from the tomb made possible a full Atonement for people of every generation and time.

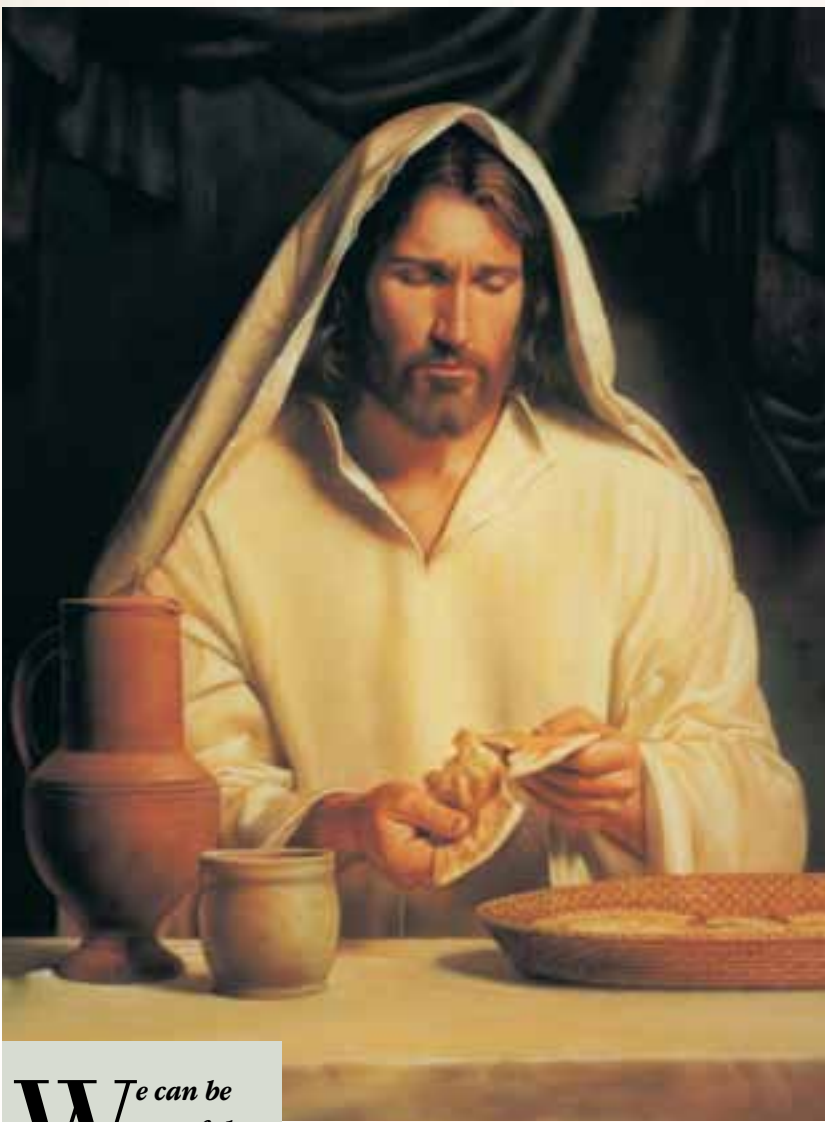
The Atonement makes the Resurrection a reality for everyone. However, with respect to our individual transgressions and sins, conditional aspects of the Atonement require our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, our repentance, and our compliance with the laws and ordinances of the gospel.

Immortality and Eternal Life

Perhaps the most oft-quoted verse in our meetings and writings is this wonderful clarifying and summarizing verse from the book of Moses: “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).



The Atonement is intensely personal and uniquely crafted for our own individual circumstances and situations.



We can be grateful that the Savior, understanding us better than we understand ourselves, instituted the sacrament that we might regularly renew our covenants by partaking of the sacred emblems.

Because of the Resurrection, all of us will have immortality. Because of the Atonement, those who have sufficient faith in the Lord Jesus Christ to take upon themselves His name, who repent and live in accordance with His gospel, who keep covenants with Him and His Father, and who participate in the saving ordinances made available in sacred ways and places will experience and enjoy eternal life.

I cannot recall ever encountering a person who professed strong faith in Jesus Christ and who was very worried about the Resurrection. Yes, all of us may have questions about the details, but we understand that the fundamental promise is all-inclusive and sure.

Because eternal life is conditional and requires our effort and compliance, most of us struggle from time to time, perhaps

regularly—even constantly—with questions related to living the way we know we should. As Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has asked, “[Do] we mistakenly believe we must make the journey from good to better and become a saint all by ourselves through sheer grit, willpower, and discipline?”³

If our salvation were only a matter of our own effort, we would be in serious trouble because we are all imperfect and unable to comply fully in every way all of the time. How, then, do we achieve the help and assistance we require? Nephi clarified the dilemma of the relationship between grace and works when he testified, “For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23).

The Bible Dictionary reminds us that *grace* means a divine mechanism or device that brings strength or help through the mercy and love of Jesus Christ made available by His Atonement.⁴ Thus, it is through the grace of Christ that we are resurrected, and it is His grace, love, and Atonement that help us accomplish the good works and make the necessary progress that otherwise would be impossible if we were left solely to our own capacities and resources.

Happiness through the Atonement

Among the many things I admire about Nephi was his attitude. His life was not easy, particularly when compared with the comfort most of us take for granted today. Nephi and his family lived for years in the wilderness before arriving in the promised land. They suffered periods of hunger, thirst, and danger. Nephi had to deal with serious family problems exacerbated by Laman and Lemuel,

finally separating himself, with his followers, from those who sided with Laman and Lemuel.

In the face of all these privations and difficulties, Nephi was able to say, “It came to pass that we lived after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27).

He understood that there is a pattern for living that results in happiness, independent of the difficulties, challenges, and disappointments that come into all of our lives. He was able to focus on the big picture of God’s plan for him and his people and was thus able to avoid being brought down by his frustrations or by the accurate observation that life is not fair. It isn’t fair, but he and his people were happy nevertheless. They understood that an Atonement would take place, and they had confidence that it would include them.

Nephi asked himself important questions that we might ask ourselves as we consider the place of Christ’s Atonement in our own lives:

“O then, if I have seen so great things, if the Lord in his condescension unto the children of men hath visited men in so much mercy, why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken, because of mine afflictions?

“And why should I yield to sin, because of my flesh? Yea, why should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul? Why am I angry because of mine enemy?” (2 Nephi 4:26–27).

After his lament he answered his own questions, knowing the approach to his problems that he must take: “Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin. Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul. . . . O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever” (2 Nephi 4:28, 34).

Does this mean that Nephi no longer had problems? Does it mean that he fully understood all that was happening to him? Remember the answer he gave to an angel several years before when he was asked an important question related to the Atonement of Christ, which was to occur in the future:

“I know that [God] loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:17).

We also can’t and won’t know the meaning of all things, but we can and must know that the Lord loves His children and that we can be the beneficiaries of a full measure of Christ’s grace and Atonement in our lives and in our struggles. Likewise, we know and must remember the foolishness and danger of giving the evil one place in our hearts.

Even when we fully understand and commit to excluding evil and the evil one from our hearts and from our lives, we fall short because too often we are “natural” men and women (see Mosiah 3:19). Thus, we must be grateful for and be practitioners of the principle of repentance. While we often speak of our repentance as an event, which it sometimes is, for most of us it is a constant, lifelong process.

Of course, there are sins of both omission and commission for which we can immediately begin the repentance process. There are particular kinds of iniquity and mistakes that we can forsake now and never revisit. We can, for example, be full-tithe payers for the rest of our days, even if that has not always been the case. But other dimensions of our lives require our continual improvement and constant attention, such as our spirituality, charity, sensitivity to others, consideration for family members, concern for neighbors, understanding of the scriptures, temple participation, and the quality of our personal prayers.

We can be grateful that the Savior, understanding us better than we understand ourselves, instituted the sacrament that we might regularly renew our covenants by partaking of the sacred emblems with the commitment to take upon ourselves His holy name, to always remember Him, and to keep His commandments. As we follow the pattern that allows us to “live after the manner of happiness,” our repentance and our performance assume a higher quality, and our ability to understand and appreciate the Atonement increases.

Repentance and Obedience

In the weeks prior to the organization of the Church in 1830, the Prophet Joseph Smith received a remarkable



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revelation that adds to our understanding of the Atonement because it was the Savior Himself who was speaking and teaching. He described Himself as “the Redeemer of the world” (D&C 19:1), acknowledged that He was following the will of the Father, and said, “I command you to repent, and keep the commandments which you have received” (D&C 19:13).

This simple pattern of repentance and obedience really is the basis for “living after the manner of happiness.” We know this is what we need to do, though sometimes we may forget why. The Lord reminds us why in the following words from the same revelation:

“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, and shrink—

“Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men” (D&C 19:16–19).

What a remarkable lesson. I am sure that none of us can imagine the significance and intensity of the Lord’s pain as He accomplished the great Atonement. I doubt that Joseph Smith at that time had a complete sense of the suffering of the Savior, though the Prophet gained greater appreciation and understanding from his own trials and torture in later years. Think of the corrective instruction given by Jesus Himself as He counseled and comforted Joseph in the dark hours of his Liberty Jail incarceration. The Lord then simply said: “The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?” (D&C 122:8).

This question to Joseph is also a question to each of us in our personal and unique struggles and challenges. None of us should ever doubt the correct answer.

That Jesus experienced what He experienced, not because He couldn't avoid it but because He loves us, is sobering indeed. Jesus also loves and honors His Father with a depth and loyalty that we can only imagine. If we feel to honor and love the Savior in return, we must never forget that He did what He did for us that we might not suffer to the same degree what justice alone would require of us.

Scourging, privations, abuse, nails, and inconceivable stress and suffering all led to His experiencing excruciating agony that could not be tolerated by anyone without His powers and without His determination to stay the course and endure all that could be meted out.

The Comprehensiveness of the Atonement

As we consider the comprehensiveness of the Atonement and the Redeemer's willingness to suffer for all of our sins, we should gratefully acknowledge that the atoning sacrifice also covers so much more! Consider these words of Alma to the faithful people of Gideon almost a century before the Atonement was actualized:

"And [Jesus] shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

"And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, 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.

"Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance; and now behold, this is the testimony which is in me" (Alma 7:11–13).

Think of a full and comprehensive remedy for our pains, afflictions, temptations, sicknesses, sins, disappointments, and transgressions. Can you imagine any alternative

to Jesus's Atonement? Then add to that the incomparable Resurrection, and we begin to understand just enough to sing, "I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me."⁵

What does the Atonement mean to you and to me? It means everything. As Jacob explained, we can "be reconciled unto [the Father] through the atonement of Christ, his Only Begotten Son" (Jacob 4:11). This means that we can repent, come into full harmony and complete acceptance with Him, and avoid the mistakes or misunderstandings that "denieth the mercies of Christ, and setteth at naught the atonement of him and the power of his redemption" (Moroni 8:20).

We avoid dishonoring and disrespecting the Savior's Atonement by heeding the counsel of Helaman, which is as pertinent today as it was in the years immediately preceding the Lord's earthly advent: "O remember, remember, my sons . . . that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, who shall come; yea, remember that he cometh to redeem the world" (Helaman 5:9).

His Atonement does indeed cover the world and all people from the beginning to the end. Let us not forget, however, that in its comprehensiveness and completeness it is also intensely personal and uniquely crafted to fit perfectly and address perfectly each of our own individual circumstances. The Father and the Son know each of us better than we know ourselves and have prepared an Atonement for us that is fully congruent with our needs, challenges, and possibilities.

Thanks be to God for the gift of His Son, and thanks be to the Savior for His Atonement. It is true and is in effect and will lead us where we need and want to be. ■

From an address given at Brigham Young University Women's Conference on May 5, 2006.

NOTES

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society course of study, 2007), 49.
2. Bible Dictionary, "Atonement," 617; see also Guide to the Scriptures, "Atone, Atonement," 22.
3. David A. Bednar, "In the Strength of the Lord," in *Brigham Young University 2001–2002 Speeches* (2002), 123.
4. See Bible Dictionary, "Grace," 697; see also Guide to the Scriptures, "Grace," 103.
5. "I Stand All Amazed," *Hymns*, no. 193.