

Forgiving Oneself

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This includes forgiving ourselves.

At a recent stake conference, as the congregation sang the hymn “Praise to the Man,” I thought about the composer, William W. Phelps. I was grateful for his hymns—15 in the current hymnbook—and for his love of the gospel and of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

I recalled how, during the trials of Missouri, he was reprimanded for misuse of Church funds and selling lands contrary to counsel. As a result, he became very bitter in Far West and turned against the Prophet and the Saints. Along with other apostates, W. W. Phelps was involved in an affidavit against the Prophet issued in Richmond, Missouri, in November 1838. After Governor Lilburn W. Boggs’s extermination order, the Saints were driven from Missouri, while the Prophet and his associates were imprisoned for months in the terrible winter dungeon of Liberty Jail.

By 1840 W. W. Phelps had experienced a profound change of heart and wrote to the Prophet pleading for forgiveness. In response, Joseph’s letter concluded with the couplet “Come on, dear brother, since the war is past, / For friends at first, are friends again at last.”¹ Joseph freely forgave Brother Phelps and took him back into full fellowship.

When Brother Phelps learned that Joseph and Hyrum had been killed by a mob, he was

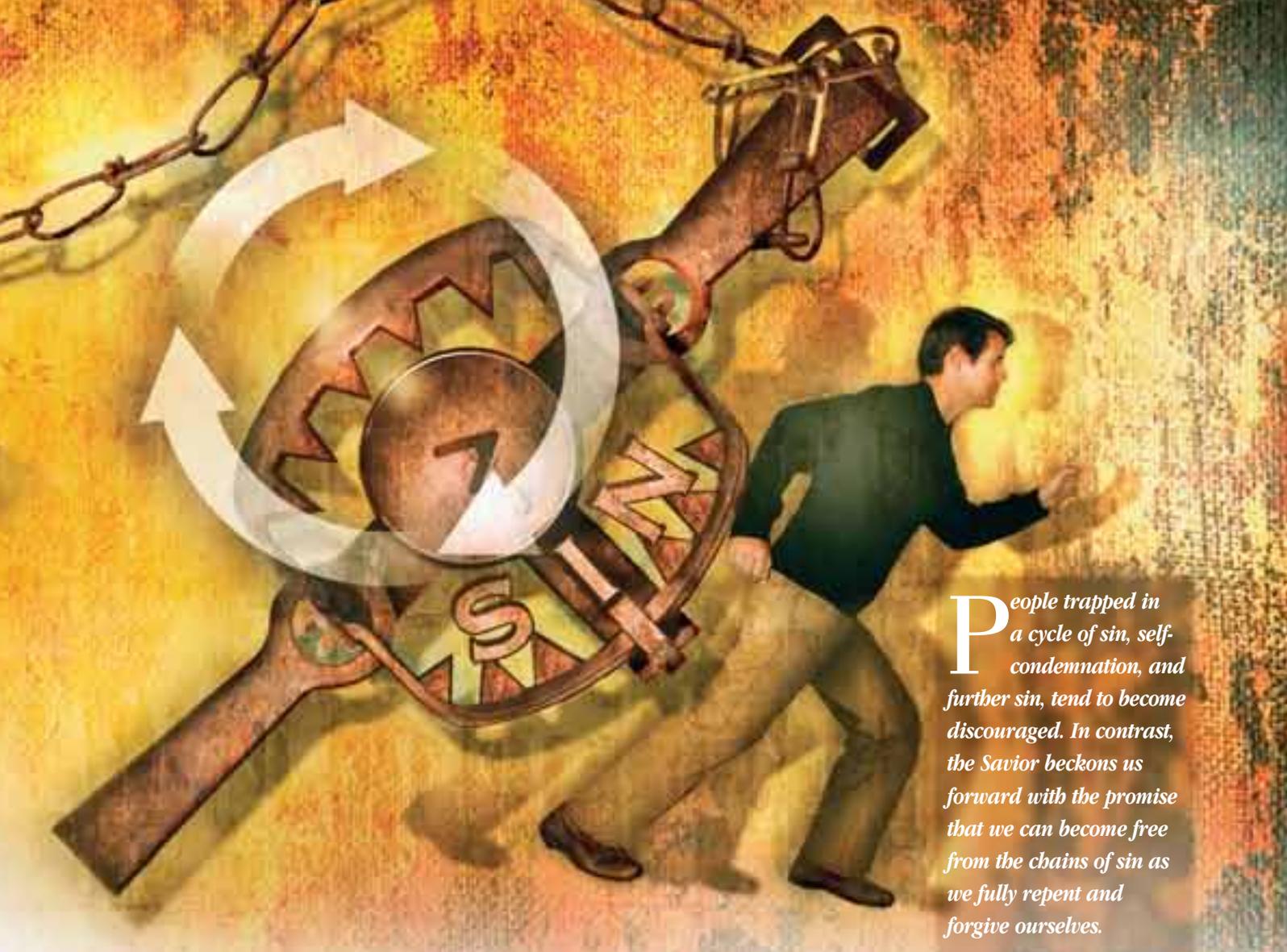
devastated. With great power and inspiration, he expressed his own feelings and those of the entire Church as he penned the hymn “Praise to the Man.”

As we sang that hymn in stake conference, I was deeply moved by one line in the chorus: “Traitors and tyrants now fight him in vain.”² How, I wondered, could Brother Phelps speak of traitors and tyrants fighting the Prophet when he himself had been one? Immediately I realized not only that Brother Phelps was no longer a traitor but also that he must have come to no longer see himself as one. The genuine, complete love and trust he received from Brother Joseph helped make it possible for him not only to forgive himself but also to erase his image of himself as a traitor.

We Must Forgive All

Unfortunately, many Latter-day Saints today continue to carry the burden of past sins because they refuse to forgive themselves. President Howard W. Hunter (1907–95) observed: “It has always struck me as being sad that those among us who would not think of reprimanding our neighbor, much less a total stranger, for mistakes that have been made or weaknesses that might be evident, will nevertheless be cruel and unforgiving to themselves. When the scriptures say





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to judge righteously, that means with fairness and compassion and charity. That's how we must judge ourselves. We need to be patient and forgiving of ourselves, just as we must be patient and forgiving of others.”³

Apparently, many individuals do not understand the importance of self-forgiveness in the process of repentance. The Lord, however, makes no exceptions when He declares, “I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive *all* men” (D&C 64:10; emphasis added). This includes forgiving ourselves.

Without doubt, Satan uses this refusal to forgive ourselves as a means of enslaving us by turning past sins into addictions. He tempts some, for example, to believe that if they make themselves suffer enough, they will not return to the sin. This often leads, however, to self-loathing or self-abuse.

Satan tempts others to judge themselves harshly and to believe they don't deserve to be forgiven, even when the Lord is willing to forgive them. Such individuals continue

to dwell on their transgressions and mistakes, remembering the details and thus increasing the danger of repeating them. According to President Boyd K. Packer, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Preoccupation with unworthy behavior can lead to unworthy behavior.”⁴

People trapped in this cycle of sin, self-condemnation, and further sin, tend to become discouraged. Satan also uses discouragement to create addictions. A discouraged individual will be tempted to stop trying or to seek solace in more sin. In contrast, the Savior beckons us forward with the promise that we can become free from the chains of sin as we fully repent and forgive ourselves.

Sorrow for Sin

Sorrow always follows the recognition of sin. The destructive form of this sorrow, which often manifests itself as self-condemnation, is related to what the Apostle

Paul called “sorrow of the world,” which “worketh death.” In contrast, he described a positive form of sorrow, “godly sorrow,” which “worketh repentance to salvation” (2 Corinthians 7:10). A main difference between these two forms of sorrow is their source. Worldly sorrow is promoted by Satan. It is the sorrow of being caught, of not being able to continue sinning, or of turning against oneself with self-loathing or disdain.

Godly sorrow, on the other hand, is sorrow given as a gift from God to those who are willing to receive it. Godly sorrow leads us to a full recognition of the magnitude of our sins but with the knowledge that we can become free of them. It leads us to fully recognize the wrongs we have committed without giving in to the temptation to see ourselves as worthless or beyond God’s love.

There is no room in godly sorrow for self-contempt. Those who refuse to forgive themselves thus bear a double burden of sin, for not only do they carry the sin itself, but they also add to it the sin of self-condemnation and refusing to forgive. Indeed, refusal to forgive is cited in the scriptures as “the greater sin” (D&C 64:9).

We Are Not Alone

Over the years, as I have counseled with members and missionaries, I have found that many wonderful, otherwise faithful Latter-day Saints find it difficult to forgive themselves, even after being told that they must do so. Some have deep-seated patterns of anger and impatience with themselves that are hard to change.

Fortunately, we are not alone. The Savior, through His Atonement, can help us not only to remove the sins but also to forgive ourselves. To receive His help, we need to ask for it. And we need to be willing, given all our mortal limitations and weaknesses, to do all that we can do (see 2 Nephi 25:23).

President Packer taught:

“Save for the exception of the very few who defect to perdition, there is no habit, no addiction, no rebellion, no transgression, no apostasy, no crime exempted from the promise of complete forgiveness. That is the promise of the Atonement of Christ. . . .

“ . . . Do not give up if at first you fail. . . . Do not give up. That brilliant morning will come.”⁵

Love is a necessary precursor to being able to forgive oneself. As we develop an overpowering love of and gratitude for Jesus for His willingness to forgive us, we earnestly desire to come unto Him—to study His life and teachings and act upon them so that we become more like Him. As we do that, our own capacity to love grows to the point that we can indeed love and forgive ourselves and others.

Forgetting

Forgetting is part of forgiving. But forgiving oneself involves a special kind of forgetting. We don’t forget the sin and its effects; rather, the memory ceases to be part of how we see ourselves. For example, when Alma had been forgiven of his sins, he said, “I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more” (Alma 36:19). The fact that he could describe his repentance to his son Helaman showed that a memory was still there. But through Christ’s Atonement and forgiveness, that memory lost its edge of guilt and self-recrimination.

We must keep sin in its proper perspective. Satan would convince us that we are defined by our sins. He would have had the repentant W. W. Phelps see himself always as a traitor. He would convince someone who has stolen that he is and always will be a thief.

The Savior, in contrast, would have us understand that we have sins that need to be cleansed, but we are much more than those stains. If I spill ketchup on my shirt, I have a stain. Perhaps it is right in front where everyone can see it. But while I have a stain, *I* am not the stain. I need to recognize that there is a good deal of my shirt that is clean and white. I believe that God sees the white shirt—the goodness in His children—and offers, through Christ, to remove the stains. If we obsess about the stain, however, it will become who we are in our minds and then in our actions.

Many years ago I had an experience that helped me understand the forgetting process. When I was very young, a man with a large, rather startling birthmark on his face moved into our ward. After some time, this man was called as our bishop, and he served during all my Aaronic Priesthood years. He was a wonderful bishop, and the members of our ward learned to love him dearly.

Years later, while I was attending BYU, someone vaguely familiar with the town where I grew up asked me who my

bishop was. He didn't recognize the name I gave and asked for a description. I described his height, his profession, and many other things about him. The individual asked, "Oh, is he the man with the birthmark on his face?" I had to think for a moment and then said, "Yes, I guess he does have a birthmark." I was surprised at myself, for in my mind the birthmark had disappeared. That simply was not an important part of who he was to me, though I could still remember it if I tried.

Forgiveness Does Not Mean Excusing Sin

Forgiving a sin does not mean excusing it. When we forgive a sin, we neither say it is OK nor that payment will not be required. Rather, forgiveness allows us to turn both the final judgment of guilt and the full payment of the debt over to the Lord. The Lord tells us in Doctrine and Covenants 64:11, "Ye ought to say in your hearts—let God judge between me and thee, and reward thee according to thy deeds."

Further, in Doctrine and Covenants 82:23, He says, "Leave judgment alone with me, for it is mine and I will repay."

When we sin or make mistakes, our Heavenly Father wants us to quickly resume our journey home with a new and even stronger grip on the iron rod. The repentance of Alma the Younger illustrates this principle of moving on. A "wicked and an idolatrous man" (Mosiah 27:8), he was brought to a realization of his sins, repented, and experienced a mighty change of heart (see Mosiah 27:11–37). He chose to take the strait and narrow path, filling his mind and his life with good works rather than remaining at the

side of the road worrying about his past transgressions. He didn't have time for that. And neither do we.

The Savior Is Key

When we turn to our Savior, He can heal us not only of the sin but also of the self-recrimination and the constant mental replaying of our sins or obsessing over them. We

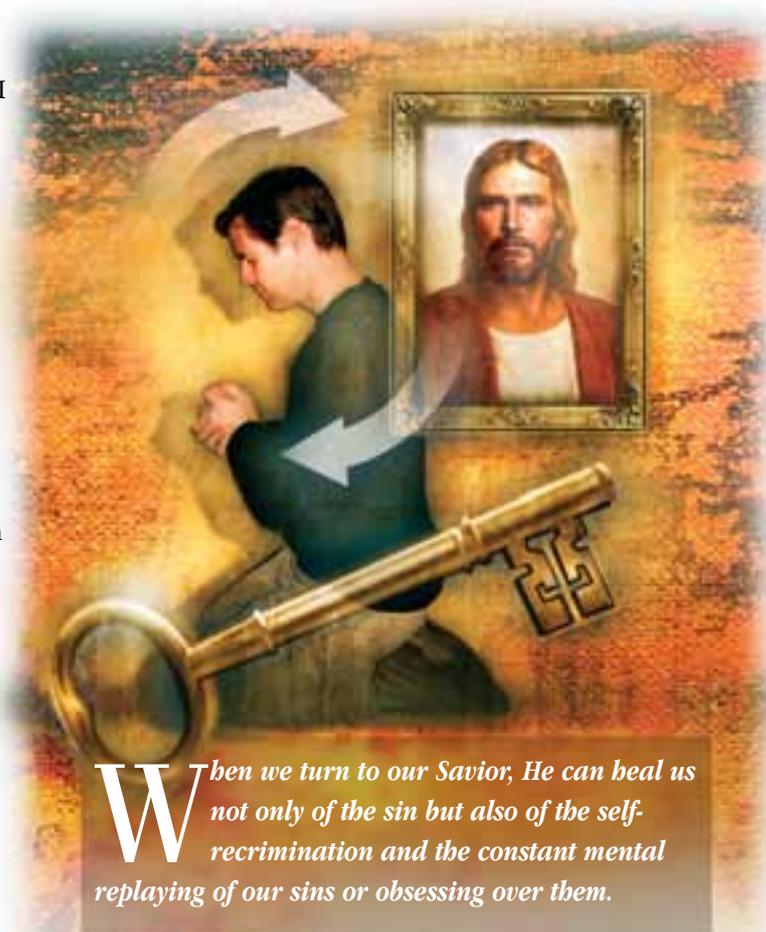
must turn the sins and the guilt over to the Savior in a process of complete repentance. For serious sins we will need the help of a bishop or another appropriate priesthood leader to complete our repentance. We then must let the Savior judge whether we or He must make final payment for the sin. Finally, we will need the Savior's help to feel self-acceptance rather than self-contempt.

With the Lord's help, we will experience a change in how we see ourselves. I believe this is the wonderful change that happened to Brother Phelps.

Because of his repentance and his willingness to forgive himself, he was no longer a traitor. He was able to accomplish many great spiritual and civic works following the Prophet's death. I believe his accomplishments would have been highly unlikely had he not, with the help of the Prophet and the Lord, fully forgiven himself. Let us learn from his example. ■

NOTES

1. See *History of the Church*, 4:163; see also 141–42.
2. *Hymns*, no. 27.
3. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (1997), 34.
4. "Little Children," *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, 17.
5. "The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness," *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 20.



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