



*The children of Israel did not have to focus on the serpents or the pain of their venomous bites or their fear of death in order to be healed. They simply had to look to the source of healing: their Savior, Jesus Christ.*

# Overcoming Addiction through the Atonement

*To those who despair of healing and peace, there is hope in Christ.*

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Many of us are familiar with the story in Numbers 21 in which the fiery serpents come among the children of Israel. To save the people, at the instruction of the Lord, “Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived” (verse 9).

This story has particular relevance to our day, when addiction—especially to pornography—is plaguing our society and families. Just as fiery serpents swept through the camp of Israel, pornography is sweeping through our world, and even the Saints of God are not escaping unharmed. President Thomas S. Monson has aptly called pornography “deadly.”<sup>1</sup> President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) called it a “plague” and “poison.”<sup>2</sup> In very real ways, the serpents of addiction are attacking us as fiercely and with as devastating consequences as the fiery serpents attacked the children of Israel.

Most of us are aware of the sad consequences of addictive behavior, so instead of focusing on the dangers of pornography and the pain associated with addiction, I would like to share a message of hope.

## **Look to the Savior**

Numbers 21 isn’t the only scriptural account about Moses’s brass serpent saving the children of Israel. In the Book of Mormon, Alma spoke of this symbol as well:

“Behold a type was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live. And many did look and live.

“But few understood the meaning of those things, and this because of the hardness of their hearts. But there were many who were so hardened that they would not look, therefore they perished. Now the reason they would not look is because they did not believe that it would heal them.

“O my brethren, if ye could be healed by merely casting about your eyes that ye might be healed, would ye not behold quickly, or would ye rather harden your hearts in unbelief, and be slothful, that ye would not cast about your eyes, that ye might perish?

“If so, wo shall come upon you; but if not so, then cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God” (Alma 33:19–22).

Consider the details Alma shared as he recounted this story. He focused his comments on the Savior and the healing power of His Atonement. He did not even mention the fiery serpents!



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that He can heal —  
and is healing — us.*

What Alma chose to tell—and what he chose to leave out—teaches one key to overcoming pornography addiction (or any challenge we may have in this life): to “cast about [our] eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God” (verse 22).

I have observed in my work as a counselor and in life in general that too many of us focus on the problem we face and how horrific it is. To some degree, it is good to realize the tendency of addictions to destroy lives and ruin relationships. There is a time and a place for warning our neighbors (see D&C 88:81), and recognition can help “harrow up” our consciences and lead us to repentance (see Alma 36:17–18). But when we spend so much time describing the attacking “serpent” that we fail to see the source of healing, we’re not much different than the Israelites. The children of Israel did not have to focus on the serpents or the pain of their venomous bites or their fear of death in order to be healed. They simply had to look to the source of healing: their Savior, Jesus Christ.

### **Don’t Focus on the Serpents**

We know from the scriptures and the teachings of latter-day prophets that genuine repentance requires feeling sincere remorse. But focusing too much on the negative can lead to fear, loss of hope, and diminishing self-worth—in the words of Nephi, we begin to “droop in sin” (2 Nephi 4:28).

Those who struggle with sin sometimes lie and rationalize in an attempt to minimize the consequences of their behavior. But somewhere inside themselves, they are aware of what they have done and know they are accountable for it. They know they are in spiritual bondage. Almost everyone I have met struggling with addiction suffers from a terrible sense of shame and a belief that he or she is broken, defective, and beyond the love and grace of God.

But this belief, in my experience, is far from the truth. Usually I find that those who struggle with addictions are warriors with tenacity, courage, and a strong desire to be clean. They win far more battles than they lose as they march toward recovery.

This may be hard for some to comprehend—if people are so strong, why is overcoming addiction so difficult?

Addiction is often misunderstood, and some believe that if a person would simply choose to recover or work harder at stopping, he or she would be able to. But the nature of addiction—and all sin, for that matter—is such that we cannot heal ourselves from it. The children of Israel could not heal themselves from the bites of the fiery serpents, and we cannot simply wish or even work addiction away. We must find our hope of healing in Christ.

### **Hang onto Hope**

But why do some choose not to look and live? In Alma 33:20 we read that “few understood the meaning of those things, and this because of the hardness of their hearts,” and that they would not look “because they did not believe that it would heal them.” Some of the children of Israel had abandoned all hope of recovery.

Consider the experience of those who struggle with pornography. Addiction brings heavy burdens of secrets and pain. It usually doesn’t take people long to want to stop. They tell themselves “never again,” yet time after time, they fall. Such succumbing can bring with it a “hardness of heart,” a refusal to believe that anything can help them.

Others may harden their hearts by becoming frustrated when, despite their best efforts, the Savior doesn’t seem to be healing them. They have counseled with their priesthood leaders, fasted and prayed with real intent, attended the temple, received priesthood blessings, and experienced promptings and comfort from the Holy Ghost—all without feeling that the Savior has healed them.

*Preach My Gospel* addresses this very concern regarding addictive behaviors: “Repentance may involve an emotional and physical process. . . . Both repentance and recovery may take time. . . . Even though a person may have some initial success, further emotional healing may be necessary to completely repent and recover.”<sup>3</sup>

It takes faith, hope, and time to heal from the patterns of self-deception, isolation, and secrecy that nearly always accompany addiction. We can take counsel from Nephi to “press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope” (2 Nephi 31:20) that He can heal—and is

## KEY POINTS

- It takes faith, hope, and time to heal from the patterns that accompany addiction.
- Recovery comes through focusing on the Savior, not on the addiction.
- Those who struggle with addiction can find help and support through Church leaders, professional counseling, and family and friends. Additional resources include the Addiction Recovery Program available through LDS Family Services and the Church website combating pornography.org.

healing—us. We need to not give up or decide that because temptations and cravings return, there is no hope in Christ. To those who will not look because they feel no hope, I say that there *is* hope in Christ. He is the hope of recovery.

### Seek Professional Knowledge and Help

We can also do much to enable our faith and the power of Christ. Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught that “Latter-day Saints believe in applying the best available scientific knowledge and techniques. . . . We enlist the help of healing practitioners, such as physicians and surgeons, to restore health.”<sup>4</sup> We should do what we can to improve our situations, learn about addiction, and find support in our families and friends. Combatingpornography.org offers resources and suggestions for individuals, families, and Church leaders. The Church-produced pamphlet *Let Virtue Garnish Thy Thoughts* (available from priesthood leaders or from store.lds.org) may also be helpful.

Professional counseling may also be appropriate. Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve has suggested to priesthood leaders that “where necessary, they can refer [those with addictions] to qualified licensed counselors and LDS Family Services.”<sup>5</sup> I do not wish to imply that everyone needs a counselor. President Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve has warned us that too often we seek a counselor when we should seek the Lord.<sup>6</sup> Yet in some cases it may be appropriate.

Another resource, the Addiction Recovery Program, available through LDS Family



## THE SOLUTIONS ARE FOUND IN CHRIST

“The solutions to life’s problems are always gospel solutions. Not only are *answers*

found in Christ, but so is the power, the gift, the bestowal, the miracle of giving and receiving those answers.”

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “How Do I Love Thee?” in *Brigham Young University 1999–2000 Speeches* (2000), Feb. 15, 2000.

Services, is a free and confidential resource for individuals struggling with addiction and for their family members. Participants learn how to apply the principles of the gospel to help them experience

not only *repentance* but also *recovery* through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

One final note to family members and loved ones of those who struggle with addiction. Often it seems that help and aid come readily to the person dealing with addiction while leaving you feeling neglected. The Savior offers you the same healing and hope He offers your loved one. You too can be supported in this trial through the Atonement of Jesus Christ (see Alma 36:3). The Atonement of Jesus Christ is for *all* of us.

I know that as we “cast about [our] eyes” and “begin to believe in the Son of God,” He will heal us (Alma 33:22). He is the Son of God, and His is the only name and way by which we can return to our Father (see Mosiah 3:17).

Alma ends his sermon on the brass serpent with his testimony that Christ “will come to redeem his people, and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins” (Alma 33:22). I add my own witness that Christ *has* come and that “[our] burdens may be light, through the joy” and healing of His eternal Atonement (Alma 33:23). ■

### NOTES

1. Thomas S. Monson, “Pornography—the Deadly Carrier,” *Ensign*, July 2001, 2.
2. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Be Not Deceived,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1983, 45; “A Prophet’s Counsel and Prayer for Youth,” *Ensign*, Jan. 2001, 7.
3. *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (2004), 187–188.
4. Dallin H. Oaks, “Healing the Sick,” *Ensign*, May 2010, 47.
5. M. Russell Ballard, “O That Cunning Plan of the Evil One,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 110.
6. Boyd K. Packer, “Solving Emotional Problems in the Lord’s Own Way,” *Ensign*, May 1978, 91–93.