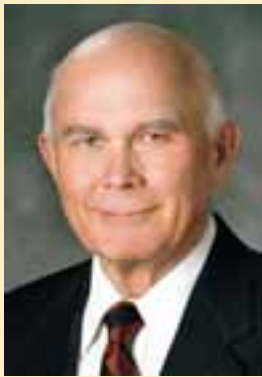


The Atonement and Faith

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To be admitted to God's presence, we must be more than clean. We must also be changed from a morally weak person who has sinned into a strong person with the spiritual stature to dwell in the presence of God.

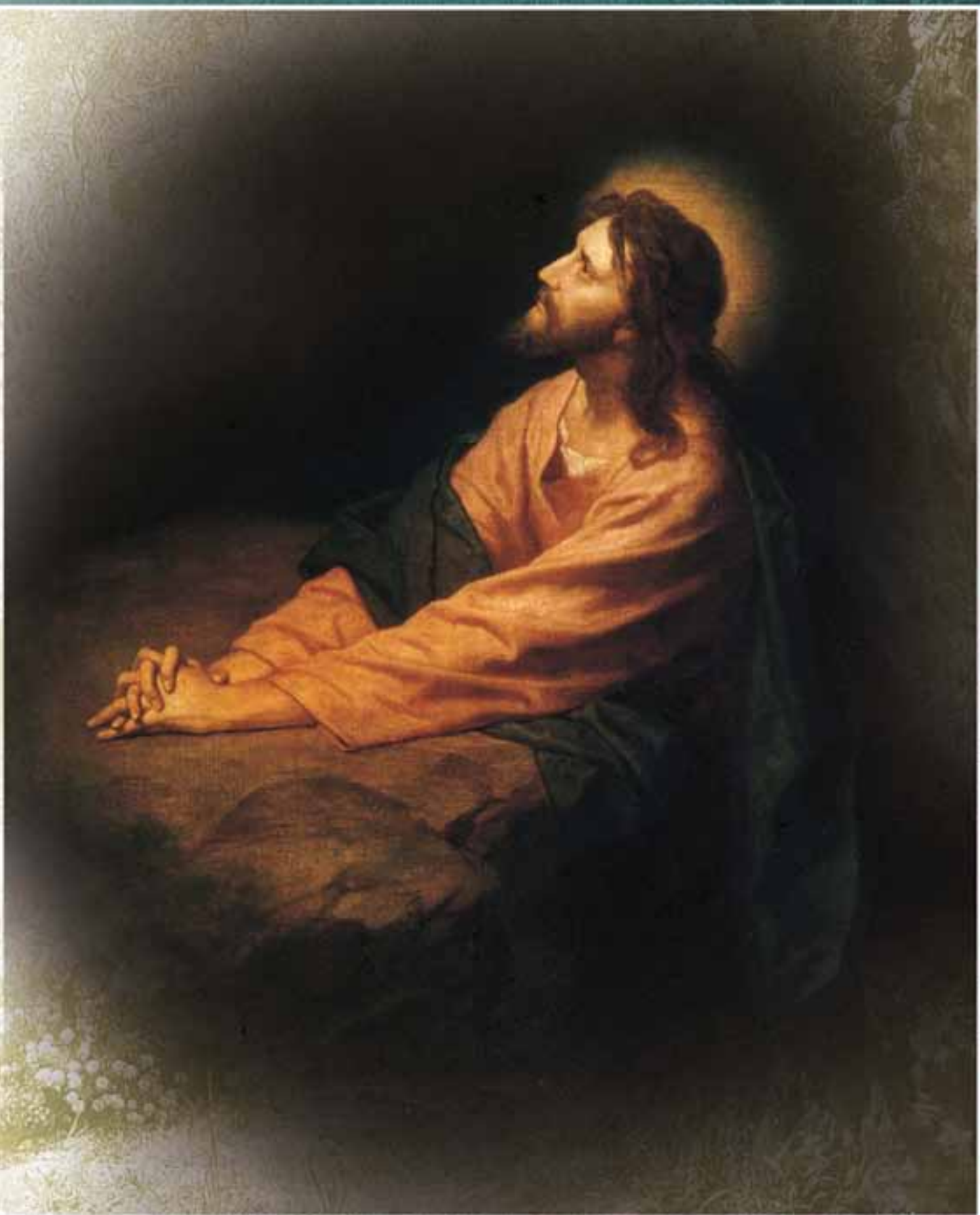
The first principle of the gospel is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Without this faith, the prophet Mormon said, we are not fit to be numbered among the people of the Lord's Church (see Moroni 7:39). The first commandment Jehovah gave to the children of Israel was "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). We should always put the Savior first. This powerful idea—that we must have faith and put the Lord first in our lives—seems simple, but in practice many find it difficult.

The scriptures teach us that faith comes by hearing the word of God (see Romans 10:17). The word of God, which comes to us by scripture, by prophetic teaching, and by personal revelation, teaches us that we are children of God the Eternal Father. It teaches us about the identity and mission of His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Redeemer. Founded on our knowledge of those truths, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is a conviction and trust that God knows us and

loves us and will hear our prayers and answer them with what is best for us.

Faith in the Lord is trust in the Lord. We cannot have true faith in the Lord without also having complete trust in the Lord's will and in the Lord's timing. As a result, no matter how strong our faith is, it cannot produce a result contrary to the will of Him in whom we have faith. Remember this when your prayers do not seem to be answered in the way or at the time you desire. The exercise of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is always subject to the order of heaven, to the goodness and will and wisdom and timing of the Lord. When we have that kind of faith and trust in the Lord, we have true security and serenity in our lives.

We look first to our Savior, Jesus Christ. He is our model. Our model is not the latest popular hero of sports or entertainment. Similarly, our most precious possessions are not the expensive toys and diversions that encourage us to concentrate on what is temporary and to forget what is eternal. Our



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model—our first priority—is Jesus Christ. We must testify of Him and teach one another how we can apply His teachings and His example in our lives.

The Savior Builds Us Up

President Brigham Young (1801–77) gave us some practical advice on how to recognize Him whom we follow. "The difference between God and the Devil," he said, "is that God creates and organizes, while the whole study of the Devil is to destroy."¹ In that contrast we have an important example

of the reality of "opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11).

Remember that our Savior, Jesus Christ, always builds us up and never tears us down. We should apply the power of that example in the ways we use our time, including our recreation and our diversions. Consider the themes of the books, magazines, movies, television, and music we in the world have made popular by our patronage. Do the things portrayed in our chosen entertainment build up or tear down the children of God?



During my lifetime I have seen a strong trend to set aside entertainment that builds up and dignifies the children of God and to replace it with portrayals and performances that are depressing, demeaning, and destructive. The powerful idea in this contrast is that whatever builds people up serves the cause of the Master and whatever tears people down serves the cause of the adversary. We support one cause or the other every day by our patronage and by our thoughts and desires. This should remind us of our responsibility to support what is good and motivate us toward doing this in a way that will be pleasing to Him whose suffering offers us hope and whose example gives us direction.



Suffering Is Part of Repentance

The central idea in the gospel of Jesus Christ—its most powerful idea, along with the universal Resurrection—is the Atonement of our Savior. We are His servants, and it is critical that we understand the role of the Atonement in our own lives and in the lives of those we teach. Essential to that understanding is an understanding of the relationship between justice and mercy and the Atonement, and the role of suffering and repentance in this divine process.

The awful demands of justice upon those who have violated the laws of God—the state of misery and endless torment described in the scriptures—can be intercepted and swept away by the Atonement of Jesus Christ. This relationship between justice on the one hand and mercy and the Atonement on the other is the core idea of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Book of Mormon teaches that the Savior does not redeem men *in* their sins: “The wicked remain as though there had been no redemption made, except it be the loosing of the bands of death” (Alma 11:41). The Savior came to redeem men *from* their sins upon

the conditions of repentance (see Helaman 5:11).

One of those conditions of repentance is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, including faith in and reliance upon His atoning sacrifice. As Amulek taught, “He that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption” (Alma 34:16). This obviously means that the unrepentant transgressor must suffer for his own sins. Does it also mean that a person who repents does not need to suffer at all because the entire punishment is borne by the Savior? That cannot be the meaning because it would be inconsistent with the Savior’s other teachings.

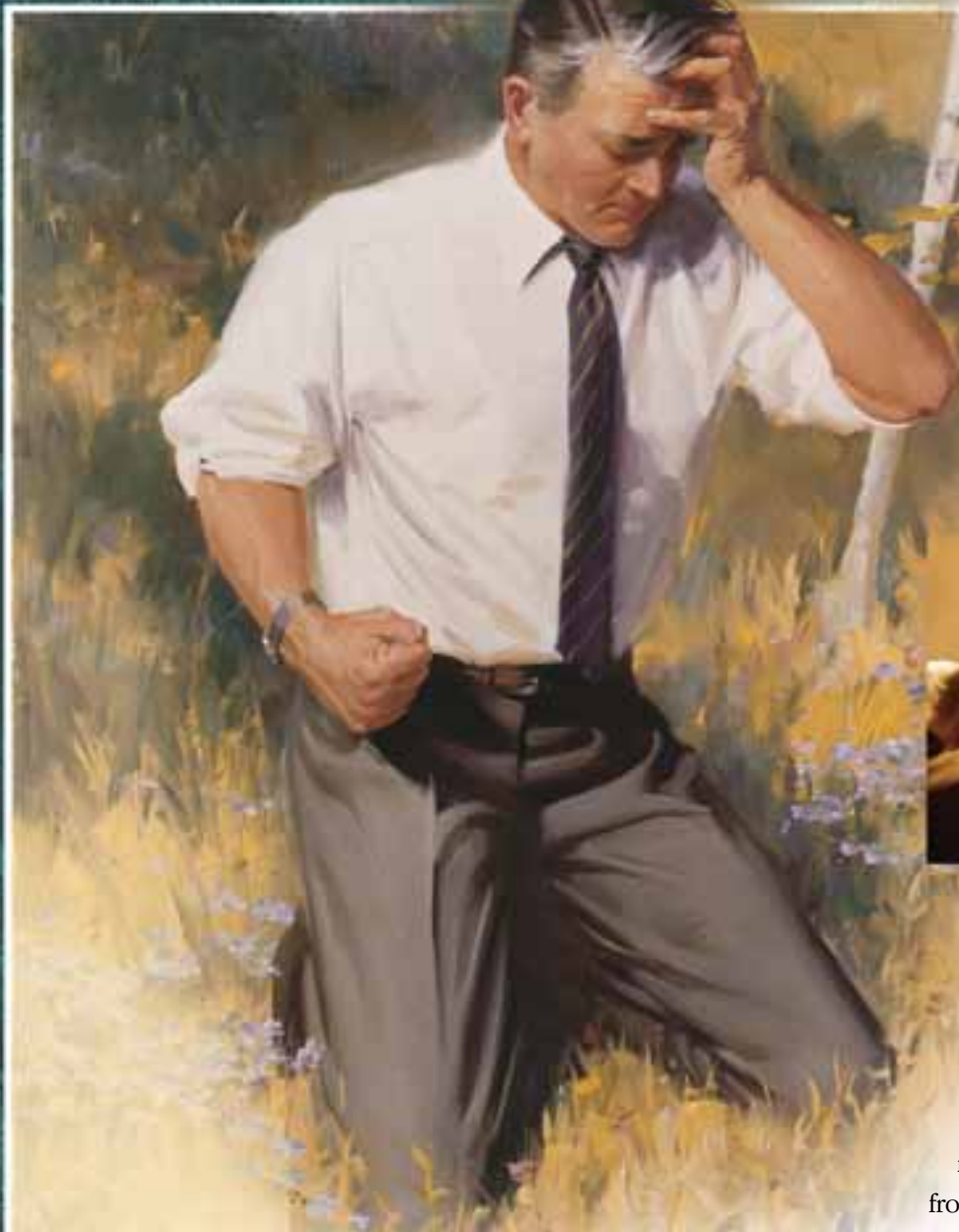
Alma 34:16 means that the person who repents does not need to suffer even as the Savior suffered for that sin. Sinners who are repenting will experience some suffering, but because of their repentance and the Atonement, they will not experience the full, exquisite extent of eternal torment the Savior suffered for those sins.

President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985), who gave such comprehensive teachings on repentance and forgiveness, said that personal suffering is a very important part of repentance. “One has not begun to repent until he has suffered intensely for his sins. . . . If a person hasn’t suffered,” he said, “he hasn’t repented.”²

The Savior taught this principle when He said His atoning sacrifice was for “all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered” (2 Nephi 2:7). The truly repentant sinner who comes to Christ with a broken heart and a contrite spirit has been through a process of personal pain and suffering for sin. He or she understands the meaning of

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sorrow Mormon described as “the sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin” (Mormon 2:13).

How comforting is the promise in Isaiah 1:18 that “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”

Alma’s statement that none but the truly penitent are saved. Alma the Younger certainly understood this. Read his accounts in Mosiah 27 and in Alma 36.

President Kimball said, “Very frequently people think they have repented and are worthy of forgiveness when all they have done is to express sorrow or regret at the unfortunate happening.”³

There is a big difference between the godly sorrow that worketh repentance (see 2 Corinthians 7:10), which involves personal suffering, and the easy and relatively painless sorrow for being caught or the misplaced

We Must Make a Mighty Change

Why is it necessary for us to suffer on the way to repentance for serious transgressions? We tend to think of the results of repentance as simply cleansing us from sin, but that is an incomplete view.

A person who sins is like a tree that bends easily in the wind. On a windy and rainy day, the tree bends so deeply against the ground that the leaves become soiled with mud, like sin. If we focus only on cleaning the leaves, the weakness in the tree that allowed it to bend and soil its leaves may remain. Similarly, a person who is merely sorry to be soiled by sin will sin again in the next high wind. The susceptibility to repetition continues until the tree has been strengthened.

When a person has gone through the process that results in what the scriptures call “a broken heart and a contrite spirit,” the Savior does more than cleanse that person

from sin. He gives him or her new strength. That strengthening is essential for us to realize the purpose of the cleansing, which is to return to our Heavenly Father. To be admitted to His presence, we must be more than clean. We must also be changed from a morally weak person who has sinned into a strong person with the spiritual stature to dwell in the presence of God. We must, as the scripture says, become “a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord” (Mosiah 3:19). This is what the scripture means in its explanation that a person who has repented of his or her sins will forsake them (see D&C 58:43). Forsaking sins is more than resolving not to repeat them. Forsaking involves a fundamental change in the individual.

King Benjamin’s congregation described that mighty change by saying that they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). Persons who have had that kind of change in their hearts have attained the strength and stature to dwell with God. That is what we call being saved.

Repentance has been the message in every dispensation. The risen Lord emphasized this to the Nephites in explaining what He called “the gospel which I have given unto you” (3 Nephi 27:13): “Now this is the commandment: Repent, all ye ends of the earth, and come unto me and be baptized in my name, that ye may be sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost, that ye may stand spotless before me at the last day” (3 Nephi 27:20).

In modern revelation, the Lord explained, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, they who believe not on your words, and are not baptized in water in my name, for the remission of their sins, that they may receive the Holy Ghost, are damned, and shall not come into my Father’s kingdom where my Father and I am” (D&C 84:74).

Forgiveness Is Certain

I conclude with a message of hope that is true for all but especially needed by those who think that repentance

is too hard. Repentance is a continuing process needed by all because “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Repentance is possible, and then forgiveness is certain.

President Kimball said: “Sometimes . . . when a repentant one looks back and sees the ugliness, the loathsomeness of the transgression, he is almost overwhelmed and wonders, ‘Can the Lord ever forgive me? Can I ever forgive myself?’ But when one reaches the depths of despondency and feels the hopelessness of his position, and when he cries out to God for mercy in helplessness but in faith, there comes a still, small, but penetrating voice whispering to his soul, ‘Thy sins are forgiven thee.’”⁴

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When this happens, we have the fulfillment of the precious promise that God will take away the guilt from our hearts through the merits of His Son (see Alma 24:10). How comforting is the promise in Isaiah 1:18 that “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”

How glorious God’s own promise that “he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more” (D&C 58:42).

I testify to you, my beloved brothers and sisters, that these words are true, that this message is the doctrine of Jesus Christ, the plan of God our Eternal Father, of which our Savior, Jesus Christ, is the author and finisher. I testify of Jesus Christ and of His prophet and of the Restoration of the gospel in these latter days through the instrumentality of Joseph Smith. ■

From an address given at the June 2001 mission presidents’ seminar in Provo, Utah.

NOTES

1. *Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. John A. Widtsoe (1954), 69.
2. *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (1982), 88, 99.
3. *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 87.
4. *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (1969), 344.