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WHY WE NEED Jesus Christ

Dial down the noise this Christmas season and reflect on the wonder and the majesty of the Son of God.

I am grateful that, in addition to Christmas, December brings an occasion to contemplate the life and contributions of the Prophet Joseph Smith, his birthday being on December 23. It is hard to appreciate fully what he achieved as an instrument in the Lord's hands in an environment of constant opposition, persecution, and challenge. In a time to come, we will see the Prophet Joseph honored as the worthy head of this great and last dispensation—the one dispensation destined to succeed even though all previous dispensations have ended in apostasy.

The translation and publication of the Book of Mormon was a signal achievement and one that is foundational to the success of the Lord's cause in this last dispensation. Through the Book of Mormon and by his visions and revelations, Joseph has revealed Jesus Christ for the modern era in His true character as the Only Begotten Son of God and Redeemer of mankind.

Especially at this season we remember the Prophet's personal relationship with the Savior and the "testimony, last of all, which [he gave] of [Christ]: That he lives!" (Doctrine and Covenants 76:22). Joseph's witness of the living Christ brings to my mind the statement of President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008): "There would be no Christmas if there had not been Easter. The babe Jesus of Bethlehem would be but another baby without the redeeming Christ of Gethsemane and Calvary, and the triumphant fact of the Resurrection."¹

Why Do We Need Jesus Christ?

A while ago, a person who has been a member of the Church for many years asked me, "Why do I need Jesus Christ? I keep the commandments; I'm a good

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person. Why do I need a Savior?" I must say that this member's failure to understand this most fundamental part of our doctrine, this foundational element of the plan of salvation, took my breath away.

"Well, to start with," I replied, "there is this small matter of death. I assume you don't want your death to be your final status, and without Jesus Christ there would be no resurrection."

I talked about other things, such as the need that even the best people have for the forgiveness and cleansing that is possible only through the Savior's atoning grace.

At another level, however, the question might be, "Can't God do whatever He wants and save us just because He loves us, without the need for a Savior?" Phrased this way, quite a few people in today's world would share that question. They believe

in God and a postmortal existence but assume that because God loves us, it doesn't matter so much what we do or don't do; He just takes care of things.

This philosophy has ancient roots. Nehor, for example, "testified unto the people that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life" (Alma 1:4).

You recognize in Nehor's doctrine echoes of an approach to salvation put forth by

Lucifer, a "son of the morning," surely the most tragic of tragic figures ever (Isaiah 14:12; see also Doctrine and Covenants 76:25–27). As God once explained, Lucifer "is the same which was from the beginning, and he came before me, saying—Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that [not] one soul shall . . . be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor.

"But, behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever" (Moses 4:1–2).

This was not simply a case of Jesus supporting the Father's plan and Lucifer proposing a slight modification. Lucifer's proposal would have destroyed the plan by eliminating our opportunity to act independently. Lucifer's plan was founded on coercion, making all the other sons and daughters of God—all of us—essentially his puppets. As the Father sums it up:

"Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;

"And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto *my* voice" (Moses 4:3–4; emphasis added).

By contrast, doing it the Father's way offers us an essential mortal experience. By "mortal experience," I mean choosing our course, "[tasting] the bitter, that [we might] know to prize the good" (Moses 6:55); learning,

repenting, and growing, becoming beings capable of acting for ourselves rather than simply being “acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:13); and ultimately overcoming evil and demonstrating our desire and ability to live a celestial law.

This requires a knowledge of good and evil on our part, with the capacity and opportunity to choose between the two. And it requires accountability for choices made—otherwise they aren’t really choices. Choice, in turn, requires law, or predictable outcomes. We must be able by a particular action or choice to cause a particular outcome or result—and by the opposite choice create the opposite outcome. If actions don’t have fixed consequences, then one has no control over outcomes, and choice is meaningless.

Law and Justice

Using *justice* as a synonym for *law*, Alma states, “Now the work of justice [that is, the operation of law] [cannot] be destroyed; if so, God would cease to be God” (Alma 42:13). It is His perfect understanding and use of law—or in other words, His justice—that gives God His power. We need the justice of God, a system of fixed and immutable laws that He Himself abides by and employs, so that we can have and exercise agency.² This justice is the foundation of our freedom to act and is our only path to ultimate happiness.

The Lord tells us, “That which is governed by law is also preserved by law and perfected and sanctified by the same” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:34). But we have to admit that none of us has always and unfailingly been “governed by law.” And we really cannot look to the law or justice to preserve and perfect us when we have broken the law (see 2 Nephi



2:5). So, being just but also being motivated by love, our Heavenly Father created mercy. He did this by offering His Only Begotten Son as propitiation for our sin, a sinless Being who could, with His Atonement, satisfy justice for us, putting us right with the law so that it is once again supporting and preserving us, not condemning us. Alma explains:

“And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also. . . .

“But there is a law given, and a punishment [or consequence] affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth; otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God.

“But God ceaseth not to be God, and mercy claimeth the penitent, and mercy cometh because of the atonement” (Alma 42:15, 22–23).

The penitent, of course, are those who take responsibility and accept His mercy by repenting.³ Or, in other words, repenting is what we do to claim the gracious gift of forgiveness that a just Father in Heaven can offer us because His Beloved Son atoned for our sins.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ

Because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, we can recover from bad choices. Because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, the impact upon us of others' sins and mistakes, and every other injustice, is redressed. To be made whole, and to be made holy, we need a Savior. So, the answer to our question is, "No, God cannot act any way He pleases to save a person. He cannot be arbitrary and also be just. And if He is not just, He is not God." Therefore, salvation and exaltation must be accomplished in a way that upholds and conforms to immutable law, to justice. And

thanks be to God, He has upheld justice by providing a Savior.

Let it be noted that in the great premortal council, Lucifer was not volunteering to be our savior. He was not interested in suffering or dying or shedding any of his blood on

our behalf. He was not seeking to become the embodiment of justice but to become a law unto himself.⁴ It is my opinion that in saying to the Father, "Give me thine honor" (Moses 4:1), Lucifer was saying, "Give me the right to rule," intending to exercise that power capriciously. The law would be whatever he said it was at any given moment. In that way, no one could be an independent actor. Lucifer would be supreme, and no one else could advance.

Jesus, on the other hand, understood that both inalterable justice and mercy would be required for His brothers and sisters to

progress. With the Father, He was seeking not to coerce and dominate us but to free and lift us so that we might "be above all" and "have all power" with the Father (Doctrine and Covenants 132:20).

How we ought to rejoice that this Firstborn Son in the spirit was willing to become the Only Begotten Son in the flesh, to suffer incomprehensibly and die ignominiously to redeem us. He perfectly unites justice and mercy. He saves us from—not in, but from—our

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sins (see Helaman 5:10–11; see also Matthew 1:21).

And He also redeems us from the Fall, from spiritual and physical death. He opens the door to immortality and eternal life. It would be impossible to plumb the depths of His love. "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: . . .

". . . He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4–5).

Glory to God

As Christmas approaches, I realize that some may have concerns and anxiety about the future. There may be a lot of “noise” in your life, more or less constant engagement online without downtime, without time to be quiet and reflect and think, without time to look inside and discern where you are and where you should be going. You may be influenced by unrealistic expectations, such as “perfection should be immediate” or “uninterrupted happiness and success should be the norm in life.”

I hope you will lay aside these misconceptions, dial down the “noise,” and take some time this Christmas season, at least an hour, if not more—to reflect on “the wonder and the majesty of . . . the Son of God.”⁵ Let it be an hour of reassurance and renewal for you.

On a prior Christmastime, I wrote this message:

“When we talk about the birth of Jesus Christ, we appropriately reflect on what was to follow. His birth was infinitely significant because of the things He would experience and suffer so that He might better succor us—all culminating in His Crucifixion and Resurrection (see Alma 7:11–12). . . .

“[But I also] think it’s appropriate this time of year just to think about that baby in the manger. Don’t be too overwhelmed or occupied with what is to come. . . . Take a quiet, peaceful moment to ponder the beginning of His life—the culmination of heavenly prophecy but the earthly beginning for Him.

“Take time to relax, be at peace, and see this little child in your mind. Do not be too concerned . . . with what [may be] coming in His life or in yours. Instead, take a peaceful



moment to contemplate perhaps the most serene moment in the history of the world—when all of heaven rejoiced with the message ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men’ (Luke 2:14).⁶ ■

From a devotional address, “A Message at Christmas,” given at Brigham Young University on December 12, 2017.

NOTES

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Gordon B. Hinckley* (2016), 330.
2. “Unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions. All beings who abide not in those conditions are not justified” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:38–39). God abides and acts by the law of the highest kingdom. Therefore, “He comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him, and all things are round about him; and he is above all things, and in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things; and all things are by him, and of him, even God, forever and ever” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:41).
3. “Yea, and as often as my people repent will I forgive them their trespasses against me” (Mosiah 26:30).
4. Those who follow Satan are pursuing that same goal, but as the Lord declares, “that which breaketh a law, and abideth not by law, but seeketh to become a law unto itself, and willet to abide in sin, and altogether abideth in sin [that is, in a state of disobedience to law], cannot be sanctified by law, neither by mercy, justice, nor judgment. Therefore, they must remain filthy still” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:35).
5. *Teachings: Gordon B. Hinckley*, 331.
6. D. Todd Christofferson, “Be at Peace,” *Ensign*, Dec. 2015, 30; *Liahona*, Dec. 2015, 36.