

The Atonement of Jesus Christ

April 2019 General Conference

Tad R. Callister

The Savior's Atonement is not only infinite in scope but also individual in reach.

At this season of the year we particularly rejoice and reflect upon the Savior's Atonement. It is indeed the most supernal, mind-expanding, passionate doctrine this world or universe has ever known. It is what gives hope and purpose to our lives.

What then is the Atonement of Jesus Christ? In one sense, it is a series of divine events that commenced in the Garden of Gethsemane, continued on the cross, and culminated with the Savior's Resurrection from the tomb. It was motivated by an incomprehensible love for each of us. It required a being who was sinless; who had infinite power over the elements—even death; who possessed a boundless capacity to suffer the consequences of all our sins and ailments; and who, in fact, descended beneath it all.¹ This was the mission of Jesus Christ—this was His Atonement.

What then was its purpose? It was to make it possible for us to return to God's presence, become more like Him, and have a fulness of joy. This was done by overcoming four obstacles:

1. Physical death
2. Spiritual death caused by Adam and by our sins
3. Our afflictions and infirmities
4. Our weaknesses and imperfections

But how can the Savior accomplish this without violating the laws of justice?

Suppose for a moment a man contemplating an exhilarating free fall makes a rash decision and spontaneously jumps from a small plane. After doing so, he quickly realizes the foolishness of his actions. He wants to land safely, but there is an obstacle—the law of gravity. He moves his arms with astounding speed, hoping to fly, but to no avail. He positions his body to float or glide to slow the descent, but the law of gravity is unrelenting and unmerciful. He tries to reason with this basic law of nature: "It was a mistake. I will never do it again." But his pleas fall on deaf ears. The law of gravity knows no compassion; it makes no exceptions. Fortuitously, though, the man suddenly feels something on his back. His friend in the plane, sensing the moment of foolishness, had placed a parachute there just before the jump. He finds the rip cord and pulls it. Relieved, he floats safely to the ground. We might ask, "Was the law of gravity violated, or did that parachute work within that law to provide a safe landing?"

When we sin, we are like the foolish man who jumped from the plane. No matter what we do on our own, only a crash-landing awaits us. We are subject to the law of justice, which, like the law of gravity, is exacting and unforgiving. We can be saved only because the Savior, through His Atonement,

mercifully provides us with a spiritual parachute of sorts. If we have faith in Jesus Christ and repent (meaning we do our part and pull the rip cord), then the protective powers of the Savior are unleashed on our behalf and we can land spiritually unharmed.

This is possible, however, only because the Savior overcame the four obstacles that can prevent our spiritual progress.

1. Death. He overcame death through His glorious Resurrection. The Apostle Paul taught, “As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”²

2. Sin. The Savior overcame sin and guilt for all those who repent. So deep and expansive is His cleansing power that Isaiah promised, “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”³

On occasion, I have met with good Saints who have had trouble forgiving themselves, who have innocently but incorrectly placed limits on the Savior’s redemptive powers. Unwittingly, they have converted an infinite Atonement to a finite one that somehow falls short of their particular sin or weakness. But it is an infinite Atonement because it encompasses and circumscribes every sin and weakness, as well as every abuse or pain caused by others.

Truman G. Madsen made this comforting observation:

“If there are some of you who have been tricked into the conviction that you have gone too far, ... that you have had the poison of sin which makes it impossible ever again to be what you could have been—then hear me.

“I bear testimony that you cannot sink farther than the light and sweeping intelligence of Jesus Christ can reach. I bear testimony that as long as there is one spark of the will to repent and to reach, *he is there*. He did not just descend *to* your condition; he descended *below* it, ‘that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth.’ [Doctrine and Covenants 88:6.]”⁴

One reason it is so essential to understand the Savior’s Atonement and its infinite implications is that with increased understanding comes an increased desire to forgive ourselves and others.

Even though we may believe in Christ’s cleansing powers, the question often arises: “How do I know if I have been forgiven of my sins?” If we feel the Spirit, then that is our witness that we have been forgiven, or that the cleansing process is taking place. President Henry B. Eyring taught, “If you have felt the influence of the Holy Ghost ... , you may take it as evidence that the Atonement is working in your life.”⁵

Some have asked, “But if I am forgiven, why do I still feel guilt?” Perhaps in God’s mercy the memory of that guilt is a warning, a spiritual “stop sign” of sorts that, at least for a time, cries out when additional temptations confront us: “Don’t go down that road. You know the pain it can bring.” In this sense, it serves as a protection, not a punishment.

Is it possible, then, to remember our sins and still be free of guilt?

Alma remembered his sins, even years after he repented. But when he cried unto Jesus for mercy, he said, “I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.”⁶

How could he remember his sins but have no pain or guilt? Because when we repent, we are “born of God.”⁷ We become, as the scriptures say, “new creatures”⁸ in Christ. With perfect honesty we can now say, “I am not the man or woman who committed those past sins. I am a new and transformed being.”

3. Afflictions and Infirmities. Alma prophesied that Christ “shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind.” Why? “That his bowels may be filled with mercy, ... that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.”⁹

How does He accomplish this? Sometimes He removes the affliction, sometimes He strengthens us to endure, and sometimes He gives us an eternal perspective to better understand their temporary nature. After Joseph Smith had languished in Liberty Jail for about two months, he finally cried out, “O God, where art thou?”¹⁰ Instead of providing instant relief, God responded, “My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; and then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high.”¹¹

Joseph now understood that this bitter experience was but a dot on the eternal spectrum. With this enhanced vision, he wrote the Saints from that same prison cell, “Dearly beloved brethren, let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God.”¹² Because of the Savior’s Atonement, we can have an eternal perspective that gives meaning to our trials and hope for our relief.

4. Weaknesses and Imperfections. Because of His Atonement, the Savior has enabling powers, sometimes referred to as grace,¹³ that can help us overcome our weaknesses and imperfections and thus assist us in our pursuit to become more like Him.

Moroni so taught: “Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, ... that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ.”¹⁴ There seem at least two channels or means of availing ourselves of those enabling powers that can refine—even perfect—us.

First, the saving ordinances. The scriptures tell us, “In the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest.”¹⁵ Sometimes we may think of ordinances as a checklist—necessary for exaltation; but in truth each unleashes a godly power that helps us become more like Christ. For example:

- When we are baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, we are made clean—thus becoming more holy like God.
- In addition, through the Holy Ghost, our minds may be enlightened and our hearts softened so we can think and feel more like Him.
- And when we are sealed as spouses, we inherit the right to “thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers”¹⁶ as gifts from God.

A second channel for these enabling powers is the gifts of the Spirit. Because of Christ’s Atonement, we are eligible to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost and its accompanying spiritual gifts. These gifts are attributes of godliness; therefore, each time we acquire a gift of the Spirit, we become more like God. No doubt that is why the scriptures enjoin us on multiple occasions to seek these gifts.¹⁷

President George Q. Cannon taught: “No man ought to say, ‘Oh, I cannot help this; it is my nature.’ He is not justified in it, for the reason that God has promised to ... give gifts that will eradicate [our weaknesses]. ... If any of us are imperfect, it is our duty to pray for the gift that will make us perfect.”¹⁸

In summary, the Savior's Atonement gives us life for death, "beauty for ashes,"¹⁹ healing for hurt, and perfection for weakness. It is heaven's antidote to the obstacles and struggles of this world.

In the Savior's final week of mortality, He said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."²⁰ Because the Savior performed His Atonement, there is no external force or event or person—no sin or death or divorce—that can prevent us from achieving exaltation, provided we keep God's commandments. With that knowledge, we can press forward with good cheer and absolute assurance that God is with us in this heavenly quest.

I bear my witness that the Savior's Atonement is not only infinite in scope but also individual in reach—that it can not only return us to God's presence but also enable us to become like Him—the crowning goal of Christ's Atonement. Of that I bear my grateful and certain witness in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.