

# The Atonement

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Humbly I join the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob, who asked, “Why not speak of the atonement of Christ?”<sup>1</sup> This topic comprises our third article of faith: “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.” [A of F 1:3]

Before we can comprehend the Atonement of Christ, however, we must first understand the Fall of Adam. And before we can understand the Fall of Adam, we must first understand the Creation. These three crucial components of the plan of salvation relate to each other.<sup>2</sup>

## The Creation

The Creation culminated with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were created in the image of God, with bodies of flesh and bone.<sup>3</sup> Created in the image of God and not yet mortal, they could not grow old and die.<sup>4</sup> “And they would have had no children”<sup>5</sup> nor experienced the trials of life. (Please forgive me for mentioning children and the trials of life in the same breath.) The creation of Adam and Eve was a *paradisiacal creation*, one that required a significant change before they could fulfill the commandment to have children<sup>6</sup> and thus provide earthly bodies for premortal spirit sons and daughters of God.

## The Fall

That brings us to the Fall. Scripture teaches that “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.”<sup>7</sup> The Fall of Adam (and Eve) constituted the *mortal creation* and brought about the required changes in their bodies, including the circulation of blood and other modifications as well.<sup>8</sup> They were now able to have children. They and their posterity also became subject to injury, disease, and death. And a loving Creator blessed them with healing power by which the life and function of precious physical bodies could be preserved. For

example, bones, if broken, could become solid again. Lacerations of the flesh could heal themselves. And miraculously, leaks in the circulation could be sealed off by components activated from the very blood being lost.<sup>9</sup>

Think of the wonder of that power to heal! If you could create anything that could repair itself, you would have created life in perpetuity. For example, if you could create a chair that could fix its own broken leg, there would be no limit to the life of that chair. Many of you walk on legs that were once broken and do so because of your remarkable gift of healing.

Even though our Creator endowed us with this incredible power, He consigned a counterbalancing gift to our bodies. It is the blessing of *aging*, with visible reminders that we are mortal beings destined one day to leave this “frail existence.”<sup>10</sup> Our bodies change every day. As we grow older, our broad chests and narrow waists have a tendency to trade places. We get wrinkles, lose color in our hair—even the hair itself—to remind us that we are mortal children of God, with a “manufacturer’s guarantee” that we shall not be stranded upon the earth forever. Were it not for the Fall, our physicians, beauticians, and morticians would all be unemployed.

Adam and Eve, as mortal beings, were instructed to “worship the Lord their God, and ... offer the firstlings of their flocks, for an offering unto the Lord.”<sup>11</sup> They were further instructed that “the life of the flesh is in the blood: ... for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.”<sup>12</sup> Probation, procreation, and aging were all components of—and physical death was essential to—God’s “great plan of happiness.”<sup>13</sup>

But mortal life, glorious as it is, was never the *ultimate* objective of God’s plan. Life and death here on planet Earth were merely *means* to an end—not the *end* for which we were sent.

## The Atonement

That brings us to the Atonement. Paul said, “As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”<sup>14</sup> The Atonement of Jesus Christ became the *immortal creation*. He volunteered to answer the ends of a law previously transgressed.<sup>15</sup> And by the shedding of His blood, His<sup>16</sup> and our physical bodies could become perfected. They could again function without blood, just as Adam’s and Eve’s did in their *paradisiacal* form. Paul taught that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; ... this mortal must put on immortality.”<sup>17</sup>

## Meaning of *Atonement*

With this background in mind, let us now ponder the deep meaning of the word *atonement*. In the English language, the components are *at-one-ment*, suggesting that a person is at one with another. Other languages<sup>18</sup> employ words that connote either *expiation* or *reconciliation*. *Expiation* means “to atone for.” *Reconciliation* comes from Latin roots *re*, meaning “again”; *con*, meaning “with”; and *sella*, meaning “seat.” *Reconciliation*, therefore, literally means “to sit again with.”

Rich meaning is found in study of the word *atonement* in the Semitic languages of Old Testament times. In Hebrew, the basic word for atonement is *kaphar*, a verb that means “to cover” or “to forgive.”<sup>19</sup> Closely related is the Aramaic and Arabic word *kafat*, meaning “a close embrace”—no doubt related to the Egyptian ritual embrace. References to that embrace are evident in the Book of Mormon. One states that “the Lord hath redeemed my soul ... ; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love.”<sup>20</sup> Another proffers the glorious hope of our being “clasped in the arms of Jesus.”<sup>21</sup>

I weep for joy when I contemplate the significance of it all. To be redeemed is to be atoned—received in the close embrace of God with an expression not only of His forgiveness, but of our oneness of heart and mind. What a privilege! And what a comfort to those of us with loved ones who have already passed from our family circle through the gateway we call death!

Scriptures teach us more about the word *atonement*. The Old Testament has many references to *atonement*, which called for animal sacrifice. Not any animal would do. Special considerations included:

- the selection of a firstling of the flock, without blemish,<sup>22</sup>
- the sacrifice of the animal’s life by the shedding of its blood,<sup>23</sup>
- death of the animal without breaking a bone, and<sup>24</sup>
- one animal could be sacrificed as a vicarious act for another.<sup>25</sup>

The Atonement of Christ fulfilled these prototypes of the Old Testament. He was the firstborn Lamb of God, without blemish. His sacrifice occurred by the shedding of blood. No bones of His body were broken—noteworthy in that both malefactors crucified with the Lord had their legs broken.<sup>26</sup> And His was a vicarious sacrifice for others.

While the words *atone* or *atonement*, in any of their forms, appear only once in the King James translation of the New Testament,<sup>27</sup> they appear 35 times in the Book of Mormon.<sup>28</sup> As another testament of Jesus Christ, it sheds precious light on His Atonement, as do the Doctrine

and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. Latter-day revelation has added much to our biblical base of understanding.

## Infinite Atonement

In preparatory times of the Old Testament, the practice of atonement was finite—meaning it had an end. It was a symbolic forecast of the definitive Atonement of Jesus the Christ. His Atonement is infinite—without an end.<sup>29</sup> It was also infinite in that all humankind would be saved from never-ending death. It was infinite in terms of His immense suffering. It was infinite in time, putting an end to the preceding prototype of animal sacrifice. It was infinite in scope—it was to be done once for all.<sup>30</sup> And the mercy of the Atonement extends not only to an infinite number of people, but also to an infinite number of worlds created by Him.<sup>31</sup> It was infinite beyond any human scale of measurement or mortal comprehension.

Jesus was the only one who could offer such an infinite atonement, since He was born of a mortal mother and an immortal Father. Because of that unique birthright, Jesus was an infinite Being.

## The Ordeal of the Atonement

The ordeal of the Atonement centered about the city of Jerusalem. There the greatest single act of love of all recorded history took place.<sup>32</sup> Leaving the upper room, Jesus and His friends crossed the deep ravine east of the city and came to a garden of olive trees on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. There in the garden bearing the Hebrew name of *Gethsemane*—meaning “oil-press”—olives had been beaten and pressed to provide oil and food. There at Gethsemane, the Lord “suffered the pain of all men, that all ... might repent and come unto him.”<sup>33</sup> He took upon Himself the weight of the sins of all mankind, bearing its massive load that caused Him to bleed from every pore.<sup>34</sup>

Later He was beaten and scourged. A crown of sharp thorns was thrust upon His head as an additional form of torture.<sup>35</sup> He was mocked and jeered. He suffered every indignity at the hands of His own people. “I came unto my own,” He said, “and my own received me not.”<sup>36</sup> Instead of their warm embrace, He received their cruel rejection. Then He was required to carry His own cross to the hill of Calvary, where He was nailed to that cross and made to suffer excruciating pain.

Later He said, “I thirst.”<sup>37</sup> To a doctor of medicine, this is a very meaningful expression. Doctors know that when a patient goes into

shock because of blood loss, invariably that patient—if still conscious—with parched and shriveled lips cries for water.

Even though the Father and the Son knew well in advance what was to be experienced, the actuality of it brought indescribable agony. “And [Jesus] said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt.”<sup>38</sup> Jesus then complied with the will of His Father.<sup>39</sup> Three days later, precisely as prophesied, He rose from the grave. He became the firstfruits of the Resurrection. He had accomplished the Atonement, which could give immortality and eternal life to all obedient human beings. All that the Fall allowed to go awry, the Atonement allowed to go aright.

The Savior’s gift of *immortality* comes to all who have ever lived. But His gift of *eternal life* requires repentance and obedience to specific ordinances and covenants. Essential ordinances of the gospel symbolize the Atonement. Baptism by immersion is symbolic of the death, burial, and Resurrection of the Redeemer. Partaking of the sacrament renews baptismal covenants and also renews our memory of the Savior’s broken flesh and of the blood He shed for us. Ordinances of the temple symbolize our reconciliation with the Lord and seal families together forever. Obedience to the sacred covenants made in temples qualifies us for eternal life—the greatest gift of God to man<sup>40</sup>—the “object and end of our existence.”<sup>41</sup>

## The Atonement Enabled the Purpose of the Creation to Be Accomplished

The Creation required the Fall. The Fall required the Atonement. The Atonement enabled the purpose of the Creation to be accomplished. Eternal life, made possible by the Atonement, is the supreme purpose of the Creation. To phrase that statement in its negative form, if families were not sealed in holy temples, the whole earth would be utterly wasted.<sup>42</sup>

The purposes of the Creation, the Fall, and the Atonement all converge on the sacred work done in temples of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The earth was created and the Church was restored to make possible the sealing of wife to husband, children to parents, families to progenitors, worlds without end.

This is the great latter-day work of which we are a part. That is why we have missionaries; that is why we have temples—to bring the fullest blessings of the Atonement to faithful children of God. That is why we

respond to our own calls from the Lord. When we comprehend His voluntary Atonement, any sense of sacrifice on our part becomes completely overshadowed by a profound sense of gratitude for the privilege of serving Him.

As one of the “special witnesses of the name of Christ in all the world,”<sup>43</sup> I testify that He is the Son of the living God. Jesus is the Christ—our atoning Savior and Redeemer. This is His Church, restored to bless God’s children and to prepare the world for the Second Coming of the Lord. I so testify in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Jacob 4:12.
2. The relationships of these components are found linked together in several scriptures, such as Alma 18:34–39; Morm. 9:12; D&C 20:17–24.
3. They were created as *amortal* beings—“without mortality”—not at that time subject to death.
4. See Alma 12:21–23.
5. 2 Ne. 2:23.
6. See Gen. 1:28; Moses 2:28.
7. 2 Ne. 2:25.
8. We should remember that God forgave Adam and Eve their transgression (see Moses 6:53).
9. Such as platelets and thrombin.
10. Eliza R. Snow, “O My Father,” *Hymns*, no. 292.
11. Moses 5:5.
12. Lev. 17:11.
13. Alma 42:8.
14. 1 Cor. 15:22; see also Mosiah 16:7–8.
15. See 2 Ne. 2:7; also “Behold the Great Redeemer Die,” *Hymns*, no. 191.
16. See Luke 13:32.
17. 1 Cor. 15:50–53.

18. Such as Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, and German.
19. We might even surmise that if an individual qualifies for the blessings of the Atonement (through obedience to the principles and ordinances of the gospel), Jesus will “cover” our past transgressions from the Father.
20. 2 Ne. 1:15.
21. Morm. 5:11; additional examples are in Alma 5:33; Alma 34:16.
22. See Lev. 5:18; Lev. 27:26.
23. See Lev. 9:18.
24. See Ex. 12:46; Num. 9:12.
25. See Lev. 16:10.
26. See John 19:31–33.
27. See Rom. 5:11.
28. *Atonement*=24; plus *atone*, *atoning*, or *atoned*=8; plus *atoneth*=3; total 35 times.
29. See 2 Ne. 9:7; 2 Ne. 25:16; Alma 34:10, 12, 14.
30. See Heb. 10:10.
31. See D&C 76:24; Moses 1:33.
32. See John 3:16.
33. D&C 18:11.
34. See Luke 22:44; D&C 19:18.
35. See Matt. 27:29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2, 5.
36. 3 Ne. 9:16; see also D&C 6:21; D&C 10:57; D&C 11:29; D&C 39:3; D&C 45:8; D&C 133:66.
37. John 19:28.
38. Mark 14:36. The word *Abba* is significant. *Ab* means “father”; *Abba* is an endearing and tender form of that term. The nearest English equivalent might be *Daddy*.
39. Centuries later, the Lord shared innermost recollections of this experience with the Prophet Joseph Smith, the record of which we read in Doctrine and Covenants 19.

40. See D&C 14:7.
41. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (1978), 568.
42. See D&C 2:3; D&C 138:48.
43. D&C 107:23.