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## What Is the Atonement?

*For behold as in Adam, or by nature they fall, even so the blood of Christ atoneth for their sins. And moreover, I say unto you, that there shall be no other name given, nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent.—Mosiah 1:115, 116.*

ONE of the ancient rituals for Christian burial of the dead says, "In the midst of life we are in death." You and I are dying at this very moment. We began to die the moment we were born, for at that moment body cells began to be destroyed and to be replaced by new ones. In the midst of life, we are in death. Life is in a constant race against death. When the process of life slows down so that the body cells die faster than they can be replaced by living new ones, we begin to decline in physical powers; eventually, death wins the lifelong battle, and we die. There is not a one of us who can escape.

### MAN'S PREDICAMENT

How did man come to be in this helpless predicament? Skeptics have ridiculed the idea of the "fall" of man. Scientists have proposed the theory of evolution which assumes that if given enough time, man will be able to perfect himself. But the stubborn, inexorable fact remains, that in all the history of the human race, no man save One only has ever conquered death, and that in all the history of the human race no nation

or civilization or people (save perhaps for the city of Enoch) has ever attained to perfection. On the contrary, when nations climb to the heights of achievement, culture, and civilization the universal experiences of history are that they destroy themselves by their own cleverness and cunning, and tumble into dust and oblivion.

Whether we like to admit it or not, the fall of man is a fact. As we pointed out previously there are certain godlike qualities in man, who was made a little lower than the angels, and crowned with glory and honor. But it is also true that the *natural* man, if left to his own devices, is carnal, sensual, and devilish, and that the thoughts of his heart are evil continually; that he is an enemy to God.

It was the fall of man which brought man to his present predicament. Adam and Eve had been warned, "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17). They ate, and they died. That death was a twofold death: first and immediately, a spiritual death, or separation from God and banishment from Eden; and second, a physical death, or separation of spirit and body. Physical death was postponed to give them a period of probation, an opportunity for repentance. Yet no amount of repentance could have brought Adam and his posterity back into God's presence, or restored spirit and body, unless *God* had been willing to do something about it.

God was not unprepared for the fall. He willingly accepted part of the responsibility for it, for he had created man and given him agency. His love would not permit him simply to write man off as a bad investment. Man had been created for fellowship with his Creator, and God could not stand idly and unconcerned by while those he loved were hopelessly enthralled by the power of Satan. Therefore God gave his only begotten Son. Willingly, he came to earth in the person of his Son, to share in the consequences of man's disobedience and fall, and of the sins and iniquities and injustices which men perpetrate against each other.

## WHAT WAS THE ATONEMENT?

Somehow or other the idea has grown up in some quarters that the atonement was an expiation for crime, that God's anger, wrath, and justice had to be appeased, that God was so angry with man that he had to be appeased and reconciled to man. But let us get this much clear in our thinking before we proceed: It was not God who had to be brought back to man or persuaded by the cruel tortures of his Son to love once more the fallen human race. It was not God's heart which had to be softened in mercy. It was *man* who had to be brought back to the *Creator* before whom his sin had made him unworthy to stand. It was *man* who had to be redeemed from the power of death, and reconciled to God so that he could be restored to God's presence. It was *man's* heart that had to be softened to repentance, not God's.

In order to understand the atonement, let us look back again at the fall of man. Adam and Eve fell by eating the fruit of a forbidden tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In their fallen state they could not tolerate God's glory and perfection; they could not abide in his presence; they hid themselves from him in the garden of Eden. In the garden there was another tree, the tree of life, which was forbidden to them. If they had been allowed to partake of that tree, they would have become immortal, but their immortality would have been imperfect, sinful immortality, an immortality which could never hope to come again into God's presence. To guard against such a calamity, God drove Adam and Eve forth from the garden, and placed Cherubim with a flaming sword to keep the way of the tree of life.

Now God was confronted with a threefold problem. First was the problem of how to destroy and overcome Satan's power of death, the power which had made man a victim and a prisoner through disobedience to God and obedience to Satan. Death was Satan's weapon. By it he thought he had destroyed man and made it impossible for his spirit ever to have the im-

plementation of the body, and impossible for the whole man—body and spirit—ever to stand again in God's presence. God turned this weapon back upon its inventor, and made physical death the means of discarding the sinful, mortal body in preparation for a new and perfect body, immortal, and capable of standing again in God's presence.

The second problem was how to rid man of the sin which made him unworthy to stand in God's presence. This was done by giving him the power, through Christ, to be spiritually reborn, to receive forgiveness both for his own sins and for the sin of Adam by which the entire race fell. And third was the problem of restoring man's agency which had been lost in the fall; for once man had fallen, he had no alternative from which to choose. Whether he was good or bad, obedient or rebellious, contrite or unrepentant, eternal death and perpetual separation from God would have been his lot. It was necessary that God somehow restore the possibility of an alternative to death-life, so that man could choose between death and life, if there was to be a continuation of the principle of agency.

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE ATONEMENT

What elements were necessary for the atonement? The person who was to bring about an atonement must necessarily partake of humanity. He must be one of the seed of Adam, for it was Adam's seed that was lost through temptation, sin, and death. He must be one who could experience in the flesh all the temptations, urges, and appetites which are common to men. He must be one who could feel joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure, happiness and woe, the love and the hatred of his fellowmen.

The person who was to bring about the atonement must also be Deity; for only Deity could live in human flesh without sin, and therefore escape the bondage of death, which is the result of sin. Only Deity could voluntarily suffer death, over-

come its power, and rise again. Only Deity could pay the ransom for all the souls of men who had come under Satan's power through sin. Only Deity could bring about atonement which was infinite—which was efficacious for all the sons and daughters of Adam.

#### THE ROLE OF JESUS CHRIST

Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, was the only person who could possibly fill these requirements and bring to pass the atonement. He gave up the glory that was his with the Father, and was born of a woman, partaking human flesh with all its limitations and inherent and acquired tendencies to sin. But he was at the same time Deity, God in human flesh. Because of his Deity he lived in flesh, surrounded by temptations, yet never did he yield to sin. When he had shown men how to live, preached his gospel, established his church, proclaimed the message of salvation and redemption to men, and instituted the ordinances of regeneration, he laid down his life willingly as an infinite and eternal sacrifice, the great and last sacrifice of which all the sacrifices of the Mosaic law were the foreshadowing and the symbol. Christ is unique in human history. There is no other name given under heaven whereby men may be saved. "The keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel: and he employeth no servant there; and there is none other way, save it be by the gate, for he can not be deceived; for the Lord God is his name" (II Nephi 6:81, 82).

#### WHAT ARE THE RESULTS OF THE ATONEMENT?

First, through the power of Christ's resurrection, the spirit and body of man are restored to each other. In the resurrection spirit and body will be inseparably united, to receive the fullness of the joy of God's presence, if worthy. This resurrection is brought to pass on every man who ever lived—good and bad, saints and sinners, the heathen nations who died without the law and infants who died before the years of accountability.

The second result of the atonement is that in the resurrected and immortal body, every man who ever lived will be brought before God for judgment. Man, who was separated from God because of sin, will be brought back to God's presence, with all of his powers of memory quickened to a bright remembrance of all his own unworthiness and guilt. Whether or not each man is worthy to remain in God's presence depends upon the choices he made during the period of his probation in the flesh, and whether or not he has chosen to accept the atonement made by Christ. Each man will receive that degree of God's presence and God's glory which his own choices during probation have rendered him capable and worthy of receiving.

Because of the atonement, man's choices again become significant. By choosing to accept Christ's atonement, and live as a son of God, he may receive life through the atonement. By refusing to accept Christ and his atonement, he remains as though there had been no atonement made, and although the atonement does bring him a resurrection of the body and a restoration to God's presence for judgment, judgment will bring him eternal banishment from God to a place where the memory of what he might have been, the knowledge of what he has lost, and the inescapable recollection of his own guilt will burn within him as a fire throughout eternity.

Justice is satisfied by the atonement, for though redeemed, all men must temporarily suffer death and banishment from God; and Christ, the sinless one, gave himself a ransom for many. Mercy is satisfied because through Christ's redemption and atonement repentant men may be brought back to God, and restored to his presence, his love, his fellowship.

Although the atonement is and will be efficacious for the heathen nations and those who died without the law, let none of us think that we can procrastinate the day of our salvation. He who knows of Christ and of his redemptive mission but who rejects that atonement and goes on in the ways of sin and

rebellion and willfulness is sinning against knowledge; he is wasting the days of his probation. The Scriptures hold out hope for those who die in ignorance. But no one who has heard of Jesus, and understood his message, and then wholly rejected the atonement which he made at such a great cost of pain and suffering and sorrow, can expect to reap any of the benefits of that atonement.

To conclude in the words of Paul to the Corinthians: "God . . . hath reconciled *us* to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the *world* unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" (II Corinthians 5:18-20).

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### *Free Moral Will, or Agency*

*For behold, my brethren, it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil; and the way to judge is as plain, that ye may know with a perfect knowledge, as the daylight is from the dark night. For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that they may know good from evil; wherefore I shew unto you the way to judge; for everything which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge, it is of God; but whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil, for after this manner doth the devil work, for he persuadeth no man to do good, no not one; neither doth his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him. And now, my brethren, seeing that ye know the light by which ye may judge, which light is the light of Christ, see that ye do not judge wrongfully; for with that same judgment which ye judge, ye shall also be judged.—Moroni 7:13-17.*

ONE of the oldest topics debated by philosophers is the question of whether man is a free agent, whether he was made to act for himself, or to be acted upon. Many philosophers, and even some world religions, teach that man is made to be acted upon, that he is the helpless pawn of blind and purposeless forces which surround him in nature, that he is a puppet dangling on the strings of fate. There are people who believe that their lives are controlled for them by the position of the stars, or by the number of letters in their name. Even among some Christian theologians there are those who believe in and teach the doctrine of predestination, which denies man his right