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The Atonement in the Book of Mormon

Summary:

Robert Millet shows that Christ's atonement is central to the Book of Mormon, particularly as it pertains to the fall. He illuminates the nature of the "good news" of the gospel—the hope of redemption through Christ. Without the atonement all other facets of our religion are bereft of ultimate power, and we remain in our sins. He explains that the atonement is infinite in several ways and that the Book of Mormon both extends an invitation to come unto Christ and teaches how to do so. Grace and works each play an important role in our salvation.

Transcript
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The Atonement in the Book Of Mormon

Robert L. Millet

Today we will follow up on the discussion of the fall. We indicated President Benson's idea that just as a person doesn't appreciate food until they know they are hungry, even so a person does not appreciate the salvation of Christ until he or she knows why he needs Christ. And the Book of Mormon helps establish that, because it establishes the fact that people are fallen until they are redeemed.

Let's go back to Mosiah, chapter 3, verse 19, and reread that verse leading us into our discussion for today about the atonement.

"For the natural man is an enemy to God [now again, this is the language of the angel to Benjamin], and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit."

And here comes the solution. We've got the problem stated—people drink damnation, as verse 18 says, "except they humble themselves and become as little children." Here comes the solution: "unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit."

Why? Why does he or she have to yield to the enticings? Because he or she has been living in a spiritually stillborn condition until the life of the Spirit is in them.

"And putteth off the natural man."

When we discussed this before, the important point was, again, that we don't climb out of our fallen nature by living longer. We don't even climb out of it by just going to church, as important and necessary as that is. It has to be put off. So if you

are going to put off the natural man, what are you going to put on? You're going to put on Christ. You don't want to stay naked.

We put off the natural man and become a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and become as a child. Remember we talked about this. This does not mean the child who is childish, but rather the child who possesses innocence and other good qualities, such as being "submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father."

As we indicated, the atonement and the fall are a packaged deal. You don't teach one without teaching the other in the Book of Mormon. Having said that, having introduced the concept with the fall, let us notice, then, that the doctrine of atonement follows on its heels.

The prophet Joseph Smith, on one occasion, was asked a series of questions about Mormonism—questions about polygamy, about the economic order of the Church, and so on. One of the questions was very interesting, probably the kind of question that most people wouldn't ask just this way. The question was: "What are the fundamental principles of your religion?"

How do you think most Latter-day Saints might answer that? I think if you lined up ten Latter-day Saints and asked them what the fundamental principles of their religion are, you'd get some interesting answers, all of which I think would be true. We believe in families. We believe in eternity. We believe in a premortal, mortal, and postmortal existence. We believe in kingdoms of glory, and so on. We believe in the Word of Wisdom. All of these are true points and doctrines, aren't they?

The Prophet's answer is very instructive and it has to do with our discussion today. He said, "The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose

again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.”¹ That’s a very interesting thought: everything else is an appendage. What is an appendage?

(Student): A branch.

A branch, an off-shoot. It’s ancillary, it’s extra, it’s good. I think that says something about the centrality of the atonement in Mormonism, or it ought to: what we ought to teach, where our focus ought to be, what our efforts should be.

I think you might remember that in 1977 Elder Boyd K. Packer, at the April conference, gave a talk on the atonement, on the mediator. Let me paraphrase badly what he said: “Truth, glorious truth, proclaims there is a Mediator. Through him justice and mercy can be fully extended to each of us.”

And then he said something like this: “This truth is the very heart of Christian doctrine. You may know much about the branches, as they branch out from the central truth, but if you only know the branches, and if somehow those branches have been cut free from the core doctrine, there will be no life, nor substance, nor redemption in them.”

I think that’s a mouthful. If we don’t teach the atonement, if we don’t tie to Christ, if we don’t tie to the atonement whatever we do in the Church—the program may be inspired, it may be good, and lifting, and noble, but if it’s not tied to redemption in Christ, it’s not going to have the power, the sticking power, the staying power, the impact that it might otherwise have. The fundamental truth, then, is the atonement.

Which gets us to an interesting idea. The Book of Mormon defines the gospel more clearly than any other book of scripture. Some years ago, I think some of you may have heard, Brother Chauncy Riddle in the Philosophy department made the statement that the greatest kept secret in the Church is the gospel.

¹ *TPJS*, 121.

Why do you think he would say that? The greatest kept secret in the Church is the gospel?

(Student): People were too busy crawling around the branches.

Yes, we are so busy clipping the branches and walking out on the branches, we don't have time to stroll in the middle, do we? We talk about all kinds of things. We will spend our days talking about self-esteem, about self-satisfaction and fulfillment, and so on. All of these are very interesting subjects, but the Lord teaches something very important in the Book of Mormon—that satisfaction, happiness, joy, and peace here and hereafter are in Christ.

When a person stands up in your fast and testimony meeting and says: "I know that the gospel is true," what is he saying? What do you think they think they are saying? "I know the gospel is true."

(Student): All the principles that we uphold are part of the gospel. For example, the atonement of Christ, the fall, faith, repentance, baptism, prophets.

You think they mean all of that?

(Student): Probably.

(Student): Some say that and they mean the Church.

I think that most would mean the Church. I think you are hitting on the truth here, and I think this is true in the sense that most people would stand and say, "I know the gospel is true. I mean I really believe the Church is true."

Let's go, if you will, to 3 Nephi, chapter 27—the great message of the Savior to the Nephites.

Remember this is the chapter where the members have been debating about what they should call the church, and the Lord gives some very interesting instructions. What should his church have, if it is to be his church?

(Student): His name.

Then what? It must have his name, but anybody can name their church the Church of Jesus Christ. What else must it have?

(Student): The gospel.

The church must be built upon his gospel, and so that leads us to what the gospel is. Let's pick up with verse 13. Who wants to read for us?

(Student): "Behold I have given unto you my gospel, and this is the gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me."

What do we know so far about the gospel? "This is the gospel . . . that I came into the world to do the will of my Father." What's the glad tidings or the good news about that?

(Student): It is Christ centered.

That's right. Now the bad news is that there was a fall, although when we talked before we decided that's not so bad. We move forward because of the fall, but the real good news is that there is hope. There is redemption. This is the gospel. Go ahead.

(Student): "And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or they be evil."

Okay, so what is the gospel then? That he came into the world, that he offered himself. This gets us to another interesting point. I think that if you asked members of the Church as a whole, versus if you asked, let's say, protestants, where the atonement took place, I think that if most protestants were asked that question they would answer that the atonement took place on the cross. I think that if you asked most Mormons they would say that the atonement took place in Gethsemane.

Now he's teaching something important for Mormons here. The atonement takes place in Gethsemene and on the cross. What begins in Gethsemene is consummated on the cross.

Notice what he says: "I came into the world to . . . be lifted upon the cross."

We might ask, "I thought you came into the world to go into Gethsemene?"

The answer is yes, he came into the world to go into Gethsemene and to be lifted up on the cross. The atonement begins in one place and is consummated in the other place.

(Student): That being lifted up, I wonder about that. He was lifted unto eternal life and great spiritual gifts, but also he was lifted up in great pain.

That's right.

(Student): Does that also mean we will be lifted up in great pain?

I hope not. Not that way. Yes, there is a powerful message behind that. First, he was lifted up under the pain of the cross, then he was lifted up into heaven, and he says, I've descended and been lifted up so that you might descend, in a mortal sense, and eventually be lifted up as I was. His whole message is that "I've been lifted up so that I can lift you up." So there is power extended to him by the Father to lift us up. I would hope no one of us would have to be lifted up quite that way. But yes, in a sense, we must descend so that we may ascend. Okay.

The meaning of the gospel—let me just say one more thing about that, one or two more things. You will often hear the word "gospel" used in different ways. One way that it is used, and it's not a wrong or incorrect way, is to say that the gospel comprehends all truths. In the university setting you will hear that to study the arts and sciences and so on is to study the gospel. In an interesting way, that is true. The gospel comprehends all truths. But in this chapter, and elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, when we are told to teach the gospel or bear testimony to the gospel, the prophets are talking in a much more narrow sense.

You see, by that kind of a definition I can teach most anything that's true, and that would be the gospel. In other words, I could be asked to give a sacrament meeting talk and stand and say, "Brothers and sisters, today I have a blackboard here, and we are going to diagram a very complex sentence, and I'm going to do it truly and faithfully. Before you are done you will have been taught the gospel."

Well, you know and I know that that not only would not go over too well, but that isn't going to inspire too many people. It's not going to change their souls. I could stand up and say, "I am going to talk to you about the laws of thermodynamics. Now those are important laws. It's important that we know what is out there, and what governs us. Those aren't the kinds of laws, principles, and ideas that the Lord tells us we are supposed to teach.

It makes a great deal of difference how we teach and what we teach in the Church. About 1984, in August, Elder (then Commissioner) Henry B. Eyring gave an address to seminary, institute, and BYU and Ricks personnel and religious educators. He talked about the challenge in teaching young people in what he described as a day when they are emersed in a sea of filth. He said there are two way of looking at the gospel: one is this all-truth concept; and another is the concept that the gospel represents the teachings, doctrines, commandments, ordinances, and powers that will bring us into the Father's presence if we will apply them. And then he said that it makes a great deal of difference which of those you choose and on which you place your emphasis when you teach the gospel. Why? Because young people, and older people for that matter, don't just need truth in some abstract sense. They need saving truth. Truth that will touch and stir their souls. That will make them into new creatures.

What then, would be meant when the scriptures speak of the Book of Mormon containing the fullness of the gospel? I am aware that it is hard to find references in the Book of Mormon to eternal marriage. I don't think we will find

too much about the degrees of glory in there. We only have a passing reference, it seems to me, of premortal existence. How can it contain the fullness of the gospel?

(Student): Could it be that it contains those principles and doctrines that could help change our souls from a fallen state to a state, whereas if we didn't experience that change, going to the temple or doing many other things would have no eternal effect?

Good. In other words, it teaches the doctrine of Christ and the principles of his gospel more plainly, more clearly than any other book of scripture. It teaches what we need to do to rise from the fall to a spiritual state. Good.

All right, let's look at some specific passages and see what they teach us about the nature of Christ's atoning sacrifice. Let's go to 2 Nephi, chapter 9. This is one of the great chapters on the atonement. This is the prophet Jacob, son of Lehi.

Let's pick up in chapter 9 with verse 4. Who wants to read for us?

(Student): "For I know that ye have searched much, many of you, to know of things to come; wherefore I know that ye know that our flesh must waste away and die; nevertheless, in our bodies we shall see God."

What does that sound like? "I know that ye know that our flesh must waste away and die." What does that sound like?

(Student): Job.

That's Job's testimony, isn't it?

"Yea, I know that ye know that in the body he shall show himself unto those of Jerusalem, from whence we came; for it is expedient that it should be among them; for it behooveth the great Creator that he suffereth himself to become subject unto man in the flesh, and die for all men, that all men might become subject unto him.

"For as death hath passed upon all men, to fulfil the merciful plan of the great Creator, there must needs be a power of resurrection, and the resurrection

must needs come unto man by reason of the fall; and the fall came by reason of transgression; and because man became fallen they were cut off from the presence of the Lord."

Okay, so we've introduced the concept of the fall and atonement. Next verse:

"Wherefore, it must needs be an infinite atonement—save it should be an infinite atonement this corruption could not put on incorruption. Wherefore, the first judgment which came upon man must needs have remained to an endless duration. And if so, this flesh must have laid down to rot and to crumble to its mother earth, to rise no more."

Let's talk about that for a minute. Why will it require an infinite atonement? Because the fall passed upon all things. The atonement must be as broad and as deep and as expansive as was the fall. And inasmuch as the fall affects mankind, humankind, every kind on the earth, the atonement must be, at least, that grand. Notice the language here—infinite atonement. What is it that Jacob says that makes it infinite?

"This corruption could not put on incorruption."

This corrupt body couldn't become an incorrupt body, meaning the resurrection. We're going to come back to that in a few minutes. So the reason Jacob gives for it being an infinite atonement is that the atonement gets around the most universal thing in existence that we know about—mortal death. That's one thing you and I have in common; we are mortal and we are all going to die. The atonement gets around that, circumvents that, brings an end to it.

There is another way in which it is an infinite atonement: it's timeless. What am I getting at? The atonement is timeless.

(Student): Throughout eternity.

Throughout eternity. Jesus is called the lamb slain from the foundation of the world, whatever that means. The atonement takes effect on earth from what

day? Does it take effect in A.D. 30. No, it takes effect in 4000 B.C. Adam and Eve and their children repented in the name of the Son, who would come in 4000 years. In fact, look at the language in the Book of Mormon, if you will. Alma, chapter 39, I think it is. The message of Alma in chapter 39 is to his son Corianton. This is the chapter where Alma has called his son to repentance, and now he's going to teach him some pretty interesting doctrine.

Verses 17–19: “And now I will ease your mind somewhat on this subject. Behold, you marvel why these things [that is, the redemption of Christ] should be known so long beforehand. Behold, I say unto you, is not a soul at this time as precious unto God as a soul will be at the time of his coming?

“Is it not as necessary that the plan of redemption should be made known unto this people as well as unto their children?

“Is it not as easy at this time for the Lord to send his angel to declare these glad tidings unto us as unto our children, or as after the time of his coming?”

Do you see the nature of the timelessness of it? The issue wasn't, essentially, when Jesus would come. The issue is that he *would* come and the people in the Book of Mormon functioned, to use the language of the Book of Mormon, as though he had already come. And so it's timeless. It is retroactive. It is proactive. So, it overcomes death. It is timeless.

There is a third way in which the atonement is infinite.

(Student): Also it is probationary in that we have an opportunity in the probationary state to gain faith in the Lord and to repent.

Good! Excellent, excellent! I think our best scripture on that would be the 42nd chapter of Alma. It is infinite. While we have Alma let's go to chapter 34. Amulek is going to be speaking to us. Let's pick up at verse 13 of Alma 34. Got it? This Amulek is no slouch, if you notice the way this guy preaches. This man is not bad for one who has just come out of semiactivity.

"Therefore, it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice, and then shall there be, or it is expedient there should be, a stop to the shedding of blood; then shall the law of Moses be fulfilled; yea, it shall be all fulfilled, every jot and tittle, and none shall have passed away."

Go ahead with verse 14.

(Student): "And behold, this is the whole meaning of the law [meaning the Law of Moses], every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal."

The atonement is said to be infinite and eternal because Jesus is infinite and eternal. Does that make sense? It is his atoning sacrifice. What would it mean when it says he is infinite and eternal? What do we know about him that would teach us his eternality or his infiniteness?

(Student): Would that be the power over death?

All right. So he inherits from his mother, Mary, a mortal woman the capacity to die. He inherits from his Father, an exalted, redeemed man, the capacity to live forever, to overcome death. He says in John 10:1, "No man taketh it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." And so the infinite nature of Christ, himself. Why was it that he was able to perform the atoning sacrifice? You answer because he volunteered. That's true. Why else was he able to do it? You say because he was sinless. That's true. Why else was he able to do it? Because he had the capacity to do what we couldn't do.

No person, no matter how noble, no matter how great, not the mightiest apostle or the greatest prophet has the capacity to lay down their body and take it up again, or to redeem other person's souls. We're going to talk about that a little when we get back to Jacob in a few moments. And so, the atonement is infinite in the sense that Christ is infinite.

Let me add a fourth way the atonement is infinite. It's not as clearly taught in the Book of Mormon, but it is implied. You don't have any question, do you, as you read the Book of Mormon, that the central character is Jesus Christ? You don't have any question about that, because we're told that the prophets have put all this together to establish something important: namely, that Jesus is the Christ—but it doesn't stop there—the eternal God, the eternal God.

When the prophet Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon received what we call the visions of the degrees of glory in section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants, they bore their testimonies. Remember how they said it?

Verses 22–23: “After the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him. That he lives! For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds [worlds, now] are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God.”

That was in 1832. Some eleven years later, Joseph Smith prepared in poetic form this whole vision. The poetic version that appeared in the *Times and Seasons*, the Church newspaper. When it came to these verses the prophet wrote them this way:

“And I heard a great voice, bearing record from heav’n. He’s the Savior, and only begotten of God—By him, of him, and through him, the worlds were all made, Even all that careen in the heavens so broad, Whose inhabitants, too, from the first to the last, Are sav’d by the very same Savior as ours; And, of course, are begotten God’s daughters and sons, By the very same truths, and the very same pow’rs.”²

That’s a beautiful statement. Even more powerful, I think, than what we have in section 76. The atonement is said to be infinite and eternal in the sense that

² Vol. 4, no. 6, pp. 82–83.

Jesus saves all he creates. He is the creator of worlds without number. He is their Savior.

Back to 2 Nephi, chapter 9. We've made it a couple verses of through Jacob's testimony now. Let's see if we can go any farther. Let's go to verse 9. Who is reading for us?

(Student): "O the wisdom of God, his mercy and grace! For behold, if the flesh should rise no more our spirits must become subject to that angel who fell from before the presence of the Eternal God, and became the devil, to rise no more.

"And our spirits must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God, and to remain with the father of lies, in misery, like unto himself; yea, to that being who beguiled our first parents, who transformeth himself nigh unto an angel of light, and stirreth up the children of men unto secret combinations of murder and all manner of secret works of darkness."

Thank you. My colleague and friend, Robert Matthews, told me that on one occasion when he was a little boy or a young man, he sat in Sunday School class where the question of resurrection, redemption, and atonement was being discussed. One of the students raised his hand and asked the teacher: "Brother so and so, what if we weren't resurrected? What if there were no resurrection? What if Jesus wasn't resurrected? What would happen to us then?

Brother Matthews said the teacher's answer was, "That's a good one. Well," he said, "I suppose what would happen when we die is we would just go on into the spirit world and then go on to a kingdom of glory without our bodies." Matthews said no one in the class knew any different, so they just shook their heads. He said that if Jacob had been there he would have said, "Whoa, not so."

Notice the language: "if the flesh should rise no more [no resurrection— isn't this a strange phrase?], our spirits must become subject to that angel who fell from

before the presence of the Eternal God. . . . And our spirits must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil." My question is, why? Why would it be the case? Let's suppose, in the wildest imagination you have, that I'm a nice guy. What if I lived a pretty good life? If I basically was an upright, noble character, why would it be that my spirit would be subject to the devil when I'm in the spirit world? What's going on here?

(Student): You'd still be fallen.

All right, that's one thing. Why would I still be fallen? Because I probably made at least one mistake, right?

(Student): Well, you were born into a fallen world.

Which hasn't been redeemed. But I'm not going to let you off that easily. What does my still being fallen have to do with my being nonresurrected. You're right, but I'm going to push it. Jacob said that if there is no resurrection, I'm subject to the devil. He's made a leap here, and you've seen it. He's made a logical leap here. In the New Testament, Paul doesn't make the same leap. He fills in the gap for us. Let me just read this to you. You don't need to turn to this. This is in 1 Corinthians, chapter 15. Same idea. I'm going to read verses 12 through 17.

"Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?

"But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen:

"And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.

"Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ; whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not.

"For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised."

Now he hasn't said anything new yet. He said that four times, but watch what he does in this next verse.

"And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain, Ye are yet in your sins."

That's verse 17. If "Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins." Now, that's about what Jacob's saying. That's what you meant when you said I am still fallen. Why? Well, is it because those who have bodies have power over those who do not? Yes. What else? What's going on? Why would my spirit be subject to him, the devil, if there was no resurrection? What does the resurrection have to do with it?

(Student): Well, the resurrection is a critical part of the atonement. Without the atonement there is no way to be sanctified.

All right. If . . .

(Student): And it breaks the chain that ties us to the atonement.

All right. So if he didn't rise from the dead like he said he would, then he didn't atone for our sins like he said he would. The resurrection became the physical illustration, the evidence, the demonstration of the atoning sacrifice. And if it didn't take place, then indeed I'm still a fallen creature in the spirit world.

(Student): So then what they are saying is that if you're not resurrected then he wasn't.

If the doctrine of resurrection isn't true, then Jesus wasn't resurrected. If Jesus wasn't resurrected we've got a problem. That's what he has just said. Our faith is vain. We're going to hell anyway. That is what he is saying. Any comments or thoughts on that?

(Student): The point is that we don't have the power to redeem ourselves.

That's right.

(Student): Even in the spirit, even if our spirit is eternal, we won't have that gift, that power to pay for those sins.

That's it. A very good point. You know, in Bruce Hafen's *The Broken Heart*, Brother Hafen poses a question I'll bet every one of us has thought about. He said

he once wondered (I have wondered about it more than once) if we didn't repent in this life but later suffered for our own sins and paid the debt to justice, as we're told in the 19th section we will have to do if we don't repent, if we could still come forth to the Celestial Kingdom? He said the answer is obviously no. Why? Because the atonement is meant to do more than just set justice straight. It isn't just a matter of fixing the books.

The purpose of the atonement is to make us into creatures who are capable and comfortable of being in Celestial presence. It's the renovation of the character and nature that's as significant as setting wrongs right. And so it's not just a matter of balancing justice and mercy. It's the renovation of the human personality that Christ came to do. And unless we repent and take advantage of that saving grace through him, which we will talk about in a few moments, that will never take place.

Let's focus our attention on a point, now, to the effect that salvation is in Christ, the person. When Joseph Smith said, as we indicated earlier, that the fundamental principle of our religion is Christ's atonement, I think that is what he was getting at. The Book of Mormon gets at this again and again. Think with me without our even turning to the Book of Mormon. After Enos's vigil and long prayer, the voice of the Lord comes to him and says what? Your sins are forgiven you. You remember the question Enos then asks?

Lord, how is it done? Kind of a feisty little fellow, I suppose. Most of us wouldn't care how it was done. We'd be tickled that it was done. He asked how it was done. And the Lord answers, anyone remember? "Because of thy faith in Christ, whom thou has never before heard nor seen" (Enos 1:8).

Let me take another one: King Benjamin, in Mosiah, chapter 4. King Benjamin's people heard the powerful address we've been talking about on the fall and the redemption. What is it that they cry out? They fall to the earth and cry out.

Shall we look at it quickly? Mosiah 4, verse 2. Notice the language: apply the atoning blood of Christ.

(Student): "O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified."

Are they going through a check list here? No. There is one thing on their mind: redemption in Christ.

A third example is offered when Alma the Younger is struck to the ground as he ponders upon his sins. As you know, in the 36th chapter of Alma it gives a very descriptive discussion of what he went through. There are words like "racked" and "tortured." At the apogee of his agony, if we might say it that way, what is it that he experiences?

"I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy . . . concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God."

And what does he cry out?

"O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death."

And then what?

"And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my sins no more."

I think they are trying to tell us something—that Christ has to be the center, the focus of our repentance, the focus of our forgiveness, that the salvation we are talking about, which is exaltation, which is eternal life, is in Christ, the person.

(Student): When we sin we actually take upon us some physical ailments, such as darkness and things like that, which we can't purify ourselves from but depend upon the intercession of the Holy Ghost.

I think that's right. You'll remember the story of Zeezrom (Alma 10–12, 15), who lives a lie and persecutes the servants of the Lord. And so what does he suffer from? His torment of conscience is so great that he suffers great fever. Paul speaks

in Corinthians about those who have for some time been taking the sacrament unworthily and of how it leads not just to spiritual sickness but ultimately to physical death. So yes, there is an element of that.

We can't extricate ourselves from those conditions by ourselves. Let me have you turn to a passage which perhaps is less known but just as poignant. Mosiah, chapter 13. We are trying to establish the point, again, that salvation is in Christ, the person. Let's look at chapter 13, about verse 27. Let's get the setting for this now. Remember where we are. This is Abinadi before the priests of Noah. They have asked him some questions, and he has asked them some questions.

His question to them is, "what do you teach?" They answer, "we teach the law of Moses." He comes back with, "and why don't you live it? Does salvation come by the law of Moses?" Their answer is, "yes, it does come by the law of Moses." Now this is his response to that (Mosiah 13: 27-28).

(Student): "And now ye have said that salvation cometh by the law of Moses. I say unto you that it is expedient that ye should keep the law of Moses as yet; but I say unto you, that the time shall come when it shall no more be expedient to keep the law of Moses.

"And moreover, I say unto you, that salvation doth not come by the law alone; and were it not for the atonement, which God himself shall make for the sins and iniquities of his people, that they must unavoidably perish, notwithstanding the law of Moses."

What is he trying to teach us about the law? Would Jesus be condemning the law? No, certainly not. Why? He gave the law. He is Jehovah. What's he saying?

(Student): Law does not save.

Law does not save. In fact that's the same message we get in 2 Nephi, chapter 2. If justice, or law, were the only issue, nobody would make it, save Jesus only.

(Student): This is an example I see frequently in the scriptures of people mistaking an item which is necessary as being sufficient.

Good. Or mistaking a means for an end. For example, in the case of the Book of Mormon, remember it was Korihor the anti-Christ who believed that the law is sufficient, that we don't need a Christ. So they come to be enamored of the means rather than the end, the token rather than the covenant.

Let me refer you to something I find very interesting, as a kind of a modern, prophetic commentary on these verses. In 1984 Elder Bruce R. McConkie, speaking here at BYU, gave a talk entitled "What Think Ye of Salvation by Grace?" He quoted these verses from chapter 13 of Mosiah and said suppose we had the scriptures, the gospel, the priesthood, the Church, the ordinances, the organization, even the keys of the kingdom, everything that now is, down to the last jot and tittle, and yet there is no atonement of Christ. What then? Could we be saved?

Will all our good works save us? Will we be rewarded for all our righteousness? Most assuredly we will not. We're not saved—and this is important, for it leads us to our final point—we are not saved by works alone, no matter how good they are. We are saved because God sent his Son to shed his blood in Gethsemene and on Calvary, that all through him might be ransomed. We are saved by the blood of Christ.

To paraphrase Abinidi, salvation does not come by the Church alone, and were it not for the atonement given by the grace of God as a free gift, all men must unavoidably perish, and this notwithstanding the Church and all that appertains to it. You see, we'd never go so far as to say we don't need the Church. You hear people say occasionally, "Well, I don't need the Church; I'm a gospel person myself." Well, that's a little bit silly. Not a little bit, it's a lot silly, because the Church administers the gospel. It administers the covenants and ordinances, and so a person can't live either a reclusive life or a life independent of the institution that

God has established to administer the gospel and expect to come unto Christ. Nor can a person take potshots at the leaders of the Church and suppose they will draw near to Christ in so doing. It's ridiculous.

But there is a message. The Church becomes the service vehicle, an auxiliary if you will, to help men and women and families come unto Christ. Salvation is in Christ, the person. That's the point I'm trying to make.

(Student): It's interesting that the priesthood is administered through the Church. It's all tied in.

It's all tied in, that is correct. It's his priesthood, it's his church, and it's his gospel.

Our final point: salvation is by the grace of Jesus Christ. I know and you know that this is a subject that is disputed and debated, usually unnecessarily, but it has been forever, it seems. It is one that is not appreciated as it should be. It is one that must be taught with great care. Now, what do I mean? On the one hand there are persons who suppose that exaltation comes by their works alone. Nothing could be farther from the truth. On the other hand, there are those who suppose that all they need to do is to verbally accept Jesus, and that is all they need to do. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

C. S. Lewis once said that the question as to whether grace or works is most important is a very silly one. He said it's like asking which of the blades of the scissors is the most important. Well, that principle is taught in the Book of Mormon with such balance. You don't have difficulty finding in the Book of Mormon the principle that works are necessary. Of course they are. Of course we do the works of righteousness to the best of our ability. That is our part of the covenant.

The gospel becomes the covenant, doesn't it? It's a covenant gospel. Christ does for us those things which we cannot do for ourselves. We do those things

which we can do to the best of our ability. And so as a part of the covenant gospel, our responsibility is to seek to live the law and to keep the commandments, to be Christians, to be good Latter-day Saints, and to work to our limits.

Let's go back and show how this is taught through some very important passages. Let's go first of all to 2 Nephi, chapter 2. Let's start there and read three or four verses and draw some conclusions. We talked about this chapter last time in regard to the fall and the atonement. Now let us look at verse 8. Who wants to read it?

"Wherefore, how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life according to the flesh, and taketh it again by the power of the Spirit, that he may bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, being the first that should rise."

Without commenting on that, I want us to look at verse 3. Again, this is Lehi speaking to Jacob.

"Wherefore, thy soul [Lehi says to Jacob] shall be blessed, and thou shalt dwell safely with thy brother, Nephi; and thy days shall be spent in the service of thy God. [This is an interesting phrase.] Wherefore, I know that thou art redeemed."

What does he mean, "I know that thou art redeemed?" I know you're going to make it. Why are you going to make it? Our tendency would be to say, "Jacob I know you are going to make it, because you've been a good boy. I know you are going to make it because you are just a chip off the old block. You're just like your dad, and you are just like your worthy older brother, Nephi. Jacob, you've kept the commandments. You've done well, that's why you are going to make it." Is that what Lehi said? "I know that thou are redeemed because of the righteousness of thy Redeemer."

Do you suppose Jacob went away saying, "Oh good. I don't have to do anything good because Jesus did all the good stuff." No, I don't think so. I think that when he finished listening to this sermon from his daddy, he wanted to be even better, didn't he? But, what does Jacob know? He knows that in the ultimate sense our righteousness, our goodness, our keeping of the commandments, our works, though necessary, are not sufficient. That's the point.

(Student): Isn't there a danger in going way to the other side instead of relying upon our own righteousness too much. Relying upon his grace too much?

Sure.

(Student): . . . saying, "well, I don't need to be quite as good as I thought."

Of course. Those are the extremes. And I think that either extreme is dangerous. Maybe the principle becomes one of keeping the commandments as best we can. Let's pray all along and the Lord will let us know what our limits are, when our offering is acceptable. You know, and I know, I think, that there can come a point when you're trying, and trying, and trying. There can come a point when multiplying, doubling, and quadrupling your efforts can actually, in the end, become spiritually counterproductive.

There begins to develop within me the sense that I can do it myself. Or, if it's going to be done, I am going to do it. There has to come a point when I do all I can do and then learn what it means to trust in the Lord and say, "I can't do any more, help me." But, you are right. It is just as wrong to sit back and say, "save me" as it is to say, "I'm going to save myself."

Let's take another. How about 2 Nephi, chapter 31. Let's go to verse 19. This is that great chapter which is the doctrine of Christ (we didn't cover it today, but could have), the doctrine of Christ or the gospel, Nephi's teachings. Let's pick up verse 19.

(Student): "And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save."

That's an interesting phrase, "relying wholly." Give me a synonym for "wholly." I think that means completely. Relying completely upon the merits of him who is mighty to save. So if I am relying completely on his merits how much am I relying upon mine? If you are relying completely on anything you are not relying on anything else. This is a sticky thing, and that's why it must be taught so carefully. Is that saying that I don't need any personal merits? No, I must do what I must do. I must try to keep the commandments. But in the end my reliance must be wholly on him—wholly on him, not on me. It isn't an issue of not doing works. It's an issue of where my faith and my trust is.

In that spirit, hold your place and go back to 2 Nephi, chapter 9. Notice the language here. This is kind of a scary verse, verse 23.

(Student): "And he commandeth all men that they must repent, and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God."

Is that a little scary to you that the persons who get saved in the kingdom of God are only those who have perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel? Do you know anybody who has perfect faith? Well, let's not get too frightened by it. What he is really saying, I'm convinced, is that those who are saved rely perfectly, who trust perfectly, who know who the source of their strength is. Remember how Nephi said it: "O, wretched man that I am! . . . nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted" (2 Nephi 4:17, 18).

Remember the brother of Jared? How does it go? "Because of the fall our natures have become evil continually; nevertheless, O Lord, thou has given us a commandment that we must call upon thee" (Ether 3:21).

(Student): This is analogous to an electric circuit. These are not parallel. They are in series. They both have to be connected up or it doesn't work.

Good. That's an excellent way of putting it.

(Student): There are a number of ways of doing that of course. And here we are, we're confronted with the issue, we're before the Lord on our knees. We're like, "Lord forgive me." We're like, "here I've done this. Like what can I do?" How can I expect any response at all? The reason you can is because of Christ.

That's right.

(Student): And you can rely upon him. You can rely wholly upon him and what he's done, therefore you can expect to receive answers.

(Student): You get an answer to a question off the balance of faith and works. As we increase in faith and the atonement begins to take effect in our lives, we have the ability to do even greater works. Even Nephi when he was given great blessings, it says the Lord told him, "I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works." But he already was.

Yes. You know the passage. Let me follow up on that. And this gets to the heart of the issue too. The passage we quote in the New Testament so often to get people to do their job is this one—Philippians chapter 2, verse 12.

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

What do you think about that? Given Philippians 2:12, given what we know about the Book of Mormon, given what we have studied so far, I ask you in the strictest sense, who is there on this earth who can work out their own salvation? The answer is, obviously, nobody. But, notice what the next verse says, and this is what we are getting at.

"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

That's correct. The answer is that once the spirit of the Lord begins to work in me as it should, the works of righteousness begin to flow from a regenerate heart. Now that's not going to happen overnight for most of us. We're not going to have that happen instantaneously like some few do in the scriptures. For most of us it's a process. But it does happen. We begin to do things because we want to. We're motivated by the right source.

Let's take one or two others, and we'll draw this to a conclusion. We're now in 2 Nephi. Let's go over to Alma, chapter 22. We read a portion of this when we studied the fall. Do you remember that this is where Aaron is teaching the father of King Lamoni? Let's pick up with verse 12 and read verses 12, 13, and 14.

(Student): "And it came to pass that when Aaron saw that the king would believe his words, he began from the creation of Adam, reading the scriptures unto the king—how God created man after his own image, and that God gave him commandments, and that because of transgression, man had fallen.

"And Aaron did expound unto him the scriptures from the creation of Adam, laying the fall of man before him, and their carnal state and also the plan of redemption, which was prepared from the foundation of the world, through Christ, for all whosoever would believe on his name."

Now note this next line. The question is, are we saved by merit? The answer is yes, but whose? Go ahead.

"And since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance, and so forth; and that he breaketh the bands of death, that the grave shall have no victory, and that the sting of death should be swallowed up in the hopes of glory; and Aaron did expound all these things unto the king."

It's a wonderful passage, because it pulls together what we've talked about in terms of Paul and the atonement and salvation that is only in Christ and the merit that is in Christ—his merit. Let's take a couple more quickly. Back to the Book of Moroni, chapter 6. And Moroni will say this a little bit differently than Nephi did, but it's the same message. Moroni, chapter 6, verse 4. We're talking about what happened when people came into the Church by baptism.

"And after they had been received unto baptism, and were wrought upon and cleansed by the power of the Holy Ghost, they were numbered among the people of the church of Christ; and their names were taken, that they might be remembered and nourished by the good word of God, to keep them in the right way, to keep them continually watchful unto prayer, relying [What was the word we used in Nephi? "Wholly." Now look at this one.] [relying] alone upon the merits of Christ, who was the author and the finisher of their faith."

"Author and finisher" is a very interesting phrase. "Be ye therefore perfect" also might be rendered, be therefore fully formed, be therefore complete, be therefore fully finished. If we were to take the time to turn to the 10th chapter of Moroni and read verse 32, we would pull this all together with Moroni, who said to us, "Come unto Christ and be perfected in him." Perfection is in Christ.

I close with this wonderful testimony from Elder Bruce R. McConkie, at his last conference address, which I think pulls this all together for us.

"Now, the atonement of Christ [he says] is the most basic and fundamental doctrine of the Gospel and it is the least understood of all our revealed truths. Many of us have a superficial knowledge and rely upon the Lord in his goodness to see us through the trials and perils of life. But if we are to have faith like Enoch and Elijah we must believe what they believed, know what they knew, and live as they lived. May I invite you to join with me in gaining a sound and sure knowledge of the atonement. We must cast aside the philosophies of men and the wisdom of the

wise and harken to that Spirit which is given to us to guide us unto all truth. We must search the scriptures, accepting them as the mind and will and voice of the Lord and the very power of God unto salvation."

And my witness is that the Book of Mormon teaches us how to come unto Christ. It isn't just a doctrinal program; it isn't just a description of this doctrine or that theological point: It is an invitation to come unto him. My witness is that salvation is in him, in his name, amen.