



“TO THEM GAVE HE POWER TO BECOME”

Daniel L. Belnap

JOHN DESCRIBES CHRIST’S mortal ministry in John 12:1 in the following manner: “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even them that believe on his name.” Though no mention is made of the sacrifice in Gethsemane or of his life-giving death on the cross or of his sublime Resurrection, this verse nonetheless reveals the purpose behind all three of these. The transformation of those who would live in such a manner as to become the sons and daughters of God is of course the very reason for the plan of salvation, but this verse does more than simply speak of Christ’s necessary role in our physical transformation into exalted beings. It also speaks to Christ’s role as a deliverer of

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knowledge concerning who we are and what we are to become, knowledge that is just as necessary to our salvation as the overcoming of death.

The well-known aphorism “Knowledge is power” certainly resonates with the doctrines of the Church. Speaking of the relationship between knowledge and power, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “God has more power than all other beings, because he has greater knowledge,”¹ establishing that divine action is the result of divine knowledge. The relationship between knowledge and power stems from the nature of knowledge itself, which is awareness—a cognitive, conscious awareness of something. As we become aware of a thing—be it an object, a concept, or a being—we are able to evaluate it and to become aware of the different aspects of that thing. This allows us to determine our relationship with that object, concept, or being and then act or react accordingly. Knowing the relationship between knowledge and power explains why we seek for more knowledge and why this search is essential for salvation, for Joseph Smith has stated, “A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge.”² With this in mind, there are three things that one must know to experience the transformation described by John: (1) what it means to be a son or daughter of God, (2) that such a designation is indeed possible to achieve, and (3) how Christ and his sacrifice made this possible to acquire.

BECOMING A SON OR DAUGHTER OF GOD

Fortunately, the doctrine of what it means to be a son or daughter of God is found throughout the scriptures. The Apostle Paul considered this theme in his letter to the Romans as he sought to reconcile the cultural differences between the Jewish and Gentile converts and establish the covenantal oneness that should define the disciples of Christ. In Romans 8:14 he revealed that “as many are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God,” thus defining the son or daughter of God not merely as one who is his literal offspring but as one who demonstrates fidelity to the covenant established by God. In other words, the recognition of one as a son or daughter of God is based on one’s living righteously and interacting with the Holy Ghost. Those “who are led by the Spirit” become “heirs of God, joint-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17). Similarly, Doctrine and Covenants 76 reveals that those who “receive the Holy Spirit . . . and who overcome by faith . . . are they into whose hands the Father has given all things. . . . They are gods, even the sons of God—wherefore, all things are theirs” (vv. 52–53, 55, 58–59). Thus, becoming a son or daughter of God means that we have lived in such a manner to have received the right to our divine inheritance, all that our Father hath.

Yet the value of sonship or daughtership is more than a future inheritance; there are blessings of this state that can be experienced in the here and now. Before receiving the vision recorded in Moses 1, Moses was told by God, “Thou art my son; wherefore look and I will show thee the workmanship of mine

hands" (Moses 1:4). Similarly, Abraham was told, "My son, my son (and his hand was stretched out), behold I will show you all [my works]" (Abraham 3:12). In both cases, it is their relationship as sons to God that allows them to receive the revelations described above. The relationship between sonship and revelation is made particularly clear in Moses with the term "wherefore." Because Moses was a son of God, he could see, if he chose to do so, the workmanship of God. Thus, becoming a son or daughter opens one to new revelatory experiences, even witnessing all that the Father has done.

ACHIEVING THIS STATE

As incredible as the doctrine of sonship may be, for this doctrine to have any power one must also know that such a designation is achievable, is not merely possible but doable. It is impossible to obtain this knowledge without the Atonement, not because it is difficult to comprehend based on the process described, but because one cannot achieve this state without the transformation of self made possible through the Atonement. Unfortunately, the world tells us that this knowledge does not exist at all and that one who seeks for it is a fool. My wife and I were on a plane to California a few years ago and we overheard a conversation between a father and his young son. The boy had just twisted off a soft drink cap and asked his dad if he had won a contest the drink was offering. His father replied, "No, you're a loser," to which his son immediately piped up, "I'm not a loser. I'm a winner." While I think we all understand what this father meant, the world too often scoffs

at the idea of being a winner, becoming a son or daughter of God as defined by Paul.

We are confronted with a world that scoffs at such incredible possibilities, treating them as simple works of fiction or acts of fancy. When not directly scoffing at the doctrine, the world presents an image of the nature of man that runs contrary to God’s description. Overt sexualization, emphasis on attaining worldly status or praise, mockery of the divinely inspired family structure, apathy—all these distract us and seek to pull us from obtaining the revelations described above. Even if we are aware of these distractions, we can struggle with the challenge of defining ourselves. Confronting these and other worldly viewpoints, we find ourselves like the young boy on the plane, trying to remind ourselves of our eternal nature while everything else tells us otherwise. This can be a very lonely experience, and, unfortunately, for many the exhaustion of this struggle becomes too much and the Spirit’s whispering that we are the children of God becomes lost as background noise.

Christ himself understood we often toil under false impressions of self-worth imposed on us by the world. His gentle admonition that we relieve ourselves of burdens speaks not of physical hardships, but the mental suppositions through which we see ourselves and the world around us, even if we do not recognize those suppositions immediately. It is at this point that Christ’s supernal work and ministry becomes the foundation to the restoration of these truths. As the prophets make clear both in the scriptures and in modern discourse, the

primary function of the Atonement is to cleanse us from the eternal consequences of wrongdoing so that we can return and dwell in God's presence as exalted beings ourselves. While the process of repentance is often discussed among the members of this church, and rightly so, an important part of the repentance process can be overlooked—obtaining the revelation that forgiveness has been achieved. Christ's Atonement not only cleanses us from the full consequences of sin but also is the means by which the revelatory relationship between ourselves and God is restored. Indeed, without the revelation that we are clean before the Lord, the full blessings of forgiveness cannot be obtained. What we are offered through the Atonement is the opportunity to see anew, to "see afar off," as Peter suggested (2 Peter 1:9), to see truly who we are and what we are to become.

Jesus himself teaches this principle in his powerful parable of the prodigal son. According to Luke 15, the younger son of a wealthy man wasted his inheritance early on "riotous living." After coming to his senses, the young man realizes his horrible situation and states, "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son" (vv. 18–19). The difference between being offspring and son becomes the central point of the entire parable as the young man arrives and repeats his confession, whereupon his father provides him clothing and a signet ring as well as a fatted calf. The actions of the father show that he has not only taken the

young man in but also restored him to the status of son. The significance of sonship is revealed in the Father’s words to his older son: “Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found” (vv. 31–32). As this parable suggests, in the divine perspective all may become sons and daughters, each receiving all that the Father hath. Thus the older son, who remained faithful, is promised his reward, and the younger man, who was once lost, is given the opportunity to become a son again.

CHRIST’S POWER TO TRANSFORM US

Throughout his ministry, Jesus provided the means for individuals to transform the very way they understood themselves. To a Canaanite woman, Jesus revealed her true standing before God. To a Samaritan woman, he taught about living water and gave her the opportunity to become the first witness to others. To a naked and disturbed young man, Christ restored his “right mind,” literally clothing his nakedness and giving him an honored place at his feet. To Peter, he beckoned to walk on the stormy water, giving Peter the understanding that such a feat was not just possible but doable. In all these instances, Christ gave the individual a new perspective, a new way of understanding who they were and their relationship to God. In the process, they found power to do things they had never before considered. So it is with repentance, which offers us a new perspective. Christ’s exhortations tell us that forgiveness is achievable, that one really can become a son or

daughter of God, but this can be done only by accepting the power of the Atonement in our lives. Thus repentance empowers us, actually revealing to us our real worth in the eyes of God and showing us that we are worthy of his atoning power and that the promised transformation is real. In other words, as we repent, we recognize our intrinsic value and know that God sees that same intrinsic value in us. This results in self-confidence as we understand that the channels of revelation are made available to us again.

These principles are illustrated in the Book of Mormon narrative described in Alma 15 as Alma and Amulek meet again with Zeezrom. Following their deliverance from the Ammonihahite prison, the two missionary-prophets came to Sidon and met with the righteous refugees. Included in this group was Zeezrom, an individual who had challenged the teachings and authority of both missionaries earlier. According to the record, he was dying, suffering from a fever. His fever, we are told, was caused by “the great tribulations of his mind on account of his wickedness, for he supposed that Alma and Amulek were no more; and he supposed that they had been slain because of his iniquity. And this great sin, and his many other sins, did harrow up his mind until it did become exceedingly sore, having no deliverance; therefore he began to be scorched with a burning heat” (v. 3).

Though the affliction described here as “a sore mind” sounds vague, there is a surprising amount of information within the text concerning what causes his sore mind and its effects.

Arising from deliberation on his sins, the sore mind results from a set of consequences that he assumed had already occurred. Fixated on his relationship to these consequences, Zeezrom creates a mental negative feedback loop. Harrowed up by the guilt of his actions, he cannot escape his suppositions of guilt. Instead he mentally relives the supposed consequences of his actions again and again. His suppositions, those mental structures that govern the way in which he understands the world around him, have such a powerful effect on his cognitive abilities that he cannot think or perceive anything except through them. Moreover, he is unable to stop from fixating on these suppositions. Like a tire that spins in one place, there is no deliverance from these thoughts, no peace of mind. And because it is the only way in which he can view himself and the world around him and because there is no way in which to escape from them, Zeezrom is literally unable to function and live.

When Alma and Amulek arrive, Zeezrom asks them to heal him. We often associate the concept of healing with a physiological disorder, but in Zeezrom's case the physical element is merely symptomatic of what we may refer to as a thinking disorder. For the healing to be effective, it must address the root of the problem, which is his inability to escape his suppositions. Thus Alma responds to Zeezrom's plea with a question: "Believest thou in the power of Christ unto salvation?" (v. 6). Though nothing in this query addresses Zeezrom's physical state, the question begins the healing process by suggesting that Christ can deliver him from his frenzied mind. This in

turn empowers Zeezrom to make the changes necessary for his healing. Just accepting the possibility that healing can occur releases Zeezrom from the negative feedback and makes his deliverance possible.

Zeezrom answers Alma's question by stating that he does believe, whereupon Alma declares, "If thou believest in the redemption of Christ thou canst be healed" (v. 8), and almost immediately Zeezrom leaps up, his fever apparently gone and his "exceedingly sore mind" healed. As promised in John's declaration, Christ's Atonement gave Zeezrom the power to transform, not just by effecting the transformation but also by empowering Zeezrom with the knowledge that such transformation can occur. Thus the power of the Atonement not only transforms us physically but also changes the very way we perceive ourselves and the world around us. This may have been what Christ meant when he said he came "that [we] might have life . . . more abundantly" (John 10:10).

BECOMING CONFIDENT

The power that results from knowing what it means to be sons and daughters of God, and that this is something that can be achieved with the power of repentance, expresses itself in a new confidence to do things that we might not have originally believed to be possible. In the book of Hebrews, ascribing this confidence to Christ as our atoning high priest, Paul wrote: "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be

touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14–16). Through knowledge of Christ, we gain the confidence to enter into the presence of God boldly, knowing that we belong there and that, as sons and daughters of God, we have a right to be there.

Alma implies this boldness through Christ in his famous series of introspective questions: “Have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? . . . Do ye exercise faith in the redemption of him who created you? . . . Do you look forward with an eye of faith, and view this mortal body raised in immortality? . . . I say unto you, can you imagine to yourselves that ye hear the voice of the Lord, saying unto you, in that day: Come unto me ye blessed, for behold, your works have been the works of righteousness upon the face of the earth?” (Alma 5:14–16). The transformation of ourselves made possible by Christ opens our imaginations to scenes of exaltation. Like Jesus, who “thought it not robbery to be equal with God” (Philippians 2:6), we too can confidently imagine being invited into God’s presence. Jacob alluded to this confidence engendered by revelations made possible through Christ’s Atonement when he declared, “Wherefore, beloved brethren, be reconciled unto him through the atonement of Christ, his Only Begotten Son, . . . and be presented as the first-fruits of Christ unto God, . . . for why not speak of the atonement of Christ, and attain to a perfect knowledge of him, as to attain to

the knowledge of a resurrection and the world to come?" (Jacob 4:11–12). As Jacob points out, the Atonement makes it possible to talk of exaltation not just as a lofty, abstract concept but as a real possibility. To rephrase his question, if this is so, why not speak of the Atonement's ultimate end, what it really makes possible? Why not speak confidently of gaining this most precious of gifts? Why not talk of becoming the sons and daughters of God, his heirs, sharing heirship with Christ himself? This is the purpose of the plan, and our awareness of its fulfillment, that it can be done, even that it will be done, gives us the confidence and boldness to actually accomplish it.

EXPERIENCING A MIGHTY CHANGE

Let me close with one last example. In the spring of 1991, while on my mission in West Virginia, I had the privilege of meeting and interacting with Barbara and teaching her the gospel. My companion and I were not the first missionaries that Barbara had met with, in fact she had been introduced to the gospel years before, but she was never able to make the full transformation. She liked being around the missionaries, but for some reason she was unable to do anything more than sit at the periphery and experience the blessings of the gospel secondhand. Barbara was somewhat eccentric; she kept her house dark with heavy curtains, she rarely went outside, and when she did, she completely covered herself. Like the house, she was hidden. As for the gospel, she enjoyed discussing it, but when we challenged her to find out for herself whether the doctrines we taught necessitated a change in her life, she

demurred. What this meant was she did not pray; though she participated in prayers, she never offered one. Over the weeks we met with Barbara, we got her to agree to come to church, which she did, enjoying the experience and the acceptance that was offered her by the members. She would tell us later how comfortable she felt in the meetings, though we noted that at times during the meetings she would get nervous and need to get up and walk around. She came to general conference that spring because she wanted to see what a prophet looked like, and upon doing so she received the impression that he was a prophet. According to the sister sitting next to Barbara, at some point Barbara turned to her and stated, "Now I understand." A few minutes later Barbara had to get up and walk around. We found her lying in the field next to the church obviously upset and very disoriented.

What we did not know was that Barbara suffered from dissociative identity disorder. Because of horribly traumatic experiences in her past, Barbara had found a way to shut off her whole personality, splintering it into aspects of herself. Normally, these aspects remained quiescent, as long as Barbara did not experience confrontation, but the Spirit's whisperings to her at general conference challenged the adversary's own whispering campaign years earlier. It was after this trauma that Barbara told us why she could not pray. It was not that she did not see efficacy in prayer. In fact, she loved hearing others pray. What Barbara believed was that God had no desire to hear specifically from her. Because of the horrors experienced

by Barbara earlier in her life, she truly believed that she was a mistake and that God was, for lack of better term, ashamed that something like her even dwelt on his creation, thus he ignored her. Worse, Barbara believed that this was the right thing for him to do. As she told us, if she were God, she would not want something like a Barbara on her world either.

Even years later, it is hard for to me to fully comprehend how she lived a life based on this understanding of herself. Looking back, it does explain the darkened house, the dislike of public places, the difficulty in developing relationships with others, and why dissociation would occur when she felt the Holy Ghost. Unfortunately, two twenty-year-olds are not necessarily the most compassionate of individuals, but even if we had been, the advice would still be the same: "Barbara, you need to pray and find out." She needed to experience the transforming power of the Atonement and receive the revelations that the Atonement promises us concerning who we are. She needed to hear her Father reveal her worth.

Barbara agreed to be baptized as she agreed to the doctrines, but we were worried because she still had not prayed, and though the physical traumas of the past were no longer impediments to baptism, she had yet to establish a relationship with God. In light of this, I will never forget her phone call to us one particular Sunday. She called around 9:30 in the morning, and I was the lucky one who answered. At first, she was crying so hard she could not talk, but as she calmed down she told me of her wrestle with the Lord. The night before she

had resolved to pray. Her decision kept her awake through most of the night, unable to rest because of her fear that God would make explicit what she had believed about herself for so many years. Finally, in the early morning hours she knelt for the first time in many years and prayed. Then she got up and walked into the bathroom. As she looked at herself in the mirror, a voice spoke to her as clear as any and said, "Barbara, you are my daughter."

That's all it took for her. This simple but profound revelation about who she really was, as opposed to who she thought she was, gave her the courage to make the rest of the transformation possible. Now, this experience was not a cure-all. Barbara still had challenges from the trauma, and her dissociative episodes still happened at times, but she had power to act now, power to become all that the promise of being a daughter of God delivers. Just as Barbara learned the true power of the first Easter that Easter season of 1991, it is my hope that this message today does the same this Easter season. May we all experience and be transformed by the revelatory power of Christ's Atonement. May we all become the sons and daughters of God.

NOTES

1. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 288.
2. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 217.

In the end, it will matter precious little what we know about a myriad of things if we have not come to know, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the God we worship.



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