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THE DILEMMA:  
AN INCOMPREHENSIBLE  
ATONEMENT?



Early in my life I experienced a dilemma regarding the Atonement that made it difficult for me to understand and utilize its power. I often heard Church leaders and seminary teachers talk about the “incomprehensible” nature of the Atonement. They would describe the Atonement as so grand and great and godlike that it is impossible for mortals to understand it fully. They would in the next breath state that the Atonement was the central doctrine of the Church and that we must know and understand it in order to experience forgiveness, peace, and direction in this life and exaltation in the life after.

This dilemma caused me at once to feel a deep reverence for the Atonement and to convince myself

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that in order to understand it and experience its full blessings I would need either to become a prophet or wait until I died. This contradiction prevented the Atonement from affecting my life.

I have since spoken to many others who have struggled with similar thoughts and emotions. People often talk about the Atonement in lofty terms, but when it comes to the personal effects of the Atonement—regularly experiencing the peace and joy from cleansing and healing—these same people feel that they are not spiritually prepared and that they can only complete this preparation sometime in the future, when they are wiser and more perfect.

How can we speak about both the incomprehensible and the comprehensible nature of the Atonement at the same time—in the same phrase—and consider both descriptions at once right and good? For me the answer to this dilemma came from the scriptures and through the living prophets of God. These essential sources helped me begin to understand the purpose and significance of the Atonement as an essential doctrine of the gospel and, more specifically, as a doctrine that could help me personally right now.

### THE ATONEMENT AS CENTRAL AND ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE

To clarify, when the word *Atonement* is used in this article it refers to the experience of Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross of Calvary, where in both places He suffered for the sin, sickness, and inadequacy of His people (see Alma 7:11; Matthew 26:35–45; Mark 14:32).

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints views the Atonement of Jesus Christ as the central and single most important doctrine in the gospel. This is affirmed in everything from the Prophet Joseph Smith’s testimony of “Jesus Christ, that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day . . . and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages,”<sup>1</sup> to the title page of the Book of Mormon, which states that one of its major purposes is “convincing . . . that Jesus is the Christ” (see also 2 Nephi 26:12).

Since the earth’s beginning, starting with Adam, prophets have taught and testified of Jesus Christ. As Jacob said, “Behold, I say unto you that *none* of the prophets have written, nor prophesied, *save they have spoken concerning this Christ*” (Jacob 7:11; emphasis added). Not just a few prophets have testified of Christ: all of the prophets on this earth have spoken or written about Christ. Helaman stated that “there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ” (Helaman 5:9). Nephi taught, “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ” (2 Nephi 25:26). Alma points out what many prophets have said regarding the singularity of Jesus Christ: “There be many things to come; and behold, there is one thing which is of more importance than they all . . . that the Redeemer liveth and cometh among his people” (Alma 7:7). These verses, with a multitude of others in scripture, establish for us a foundation: the Atonement of Jesus Christ truly is the central and most essential doctrine of this gospel.

The testimonies of the prophets, the centrality of the Atonement in the gospel and in the Book of Mormon,

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and searching the scriptures took me from thinking that I simply needed to be familiar with the story of Jesus Christ to finally understanding that what Christ had accomplished through the Atonement was essential for my salvation. “For it is expedient that an atonement should be made; for according to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish” (Alma 34:9). Words such as “expedient,” “must,” “all mankind,” and “unavoidably” testify that the Atonement is not meant for mere religion hobbyists but is absolutely necessary for us all.

### THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT

Having now identified the Atonement as central and essential, the question follows: is the Atonement incomprehensible? The easy answer is yes—parts of it are incomprehensible. There are aspects of the Atonement that are not possible for us to understand fully right now; but it is not because we as mortals lack the necessary intelligence. It is not because God does not trust us with that knowledge or because we are not spiritual enough. As natural, mortal men and women, we do not have the capacity to comprehend the totality of the Atonement. That knowledge will come at some point after this life, when “knowing all things,” as our Heavenly Father does, becomes possible for us (Moroni 7:22). Until we reach such a point, we must do as King Benjamin instructed and “believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things,” but also “believe that man doth not comprehend

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all the things which the Lord can comprehend” (Mosiah 4:9). In that light, let us examine those aspects of the Atonement that are often considered incomprehensible.

*Infinite.* “Therefore there can be nothing which is short of an infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world” (Alma 34:12). We can, of course, understand the mathematical definition of the word “infinite,” but as mortals we cannot quite wrap our minds around the literal truth of a thing that continues forever. Nearly everything that surrounds us in this life has an end. There is an end to childhood; there is an end to every career; there is an end to physical prowess, agility, and strength; and, of course, there is an end to our mortal lives. *Finite* is a concept we understand completely.

It takes an “infinite atonement” and nothing less to overcome the sins of the entire world. Think of the tragedy of a *finite* atonement. A finite atonement would have a limit to its ability to encompass all sin. What if, for example, the Atonement had a maximum quantitative capacity, beyond which its power could not reach. If that maximum capacity were, say, six billion sins, it would be sad for the individual whose sin reached 6,000,000,001. The Atonement cannot be finite because God’s power and ability are limitless, infinite.<sup>2</sup>

I was never good at math in school, but there was one concept I did understand. Adding any number—great or small—to infinity always equals infinity. Expand that concept, and simple math such as the addition, subtraction, multiplication, or division of any number by infinity will always yield infinity.<sup>3</sup> Now, reconsider the individual whose sin was number 6,000,000,001. Place all 6,000,000,001 sins

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next to an infinite atonement, and they are completely “swallowed up” (Mosiah 15:7) by the Atonement’s very infinite nature.

Consider also the capacity of an infinite atonement as it relates to time. The scriptures tell us that time constrains only those of us here on this earth (see Alma 40:8), and therefore we speak about things as being in the past, present, or future. With a finite atonement, time would place a constraint on the capacity of the Atonement because it would demand that only those sins occurring after the actual act of the Atonement could rightfully claim the power of the Atonement. Sins committed before the actual act of the Atonement would not be eligible to receive its power. So another facet of an infinite atonement is the fact that time is not relevant. All those who have lived, are living, or will live can access the power of the Atonement for redemption from sin (see Mosiah 3:13; Jarom 1:11; Alma 39:15–19).

*Forgiveness and resurrection.* As mortals, we are prey to both physical and spiritual death. Both deaths become like a cavernous pit with walls so high that we cannot climb out. We are trapped with no hope of escape unless someone outside the pit has ropes or ladders to get us out. “O how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster . . . which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit” (2 Nephi 9:10). The source of our escape comes through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior who would “atone for the sins of the world” (Alma 34:8) and who “bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead” (Mosiah 15:20).

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But with the relief that comes from the possibility of rescue also comes another dilemma: how can the suffering and death of one individual allow another individual to overcome sin and death? Amulek explored this same question: “Now there is not any man that can sacrifice his own blood which will atone for the sins of another” (Alma 34:11). There is simply no human being who can sacrifice his or her own blood to atone for the sins of someone else. As Amulek taught, if a man murders, the life of someone else cannot pay for the murder; only the life of the man who committed the murder can atone for his crime, though even that falls short (see Alma 34:11–12).<sup>4</sup> There really is only one way: “Therefore there can be nothing which is short of an infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world” (Alma 34:12), “for it shall not be a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice” (v. 10).

Elder James E. Talmage addresses the incomprehensible nature of the covering of our sins through the Atonement: “In some manner, actual and terribly real though to man incomprehensible, the Savior took upon Himself the burden of the sins of mankind from Adam to the end of the world.”<sup>5</sup> And Elder Bruce R. McConkie emphasizes that “in some way incomprehensible to us, the effects of [Christ’s] resurrection pass upon all men so that all shall rise from the grave.”<sup>6</sup> We simply will not understand these things completely until we become like our Heavenly Father.

*Performed by a God.* While the scriptures tell us of God, our Heavenly Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ (see Moroni 7:2, 48), and describe some of their characteristics

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and attributes (see D&C 29:1; Alma 32:22; 2 Nephi 9:20; Ether 3:12), we cannot fully understand all that it means to be God: “Behold, great and marvelous are the works of the Lord. How unsearchable are the depths of the mysteries of him; and it is impossible that man should find out all his ways” (Jacob 4:8). Moses learned this truth from experience when God told him, “I will show thee the workmanship of mine hands; but not all, for my works are without end, and also my words. . . . The heavens, they are many, and they cannot be numbered unto man” (Moses 1:4, 37).

Although He lived on the earth as a mortal, we see in Jesus the capacity of a God. That ability was made possible because of the nature of His Father, God the Father (see Alma 7:10; Mosiah 3:8; 15:3; D&C 93:4). Jesus’s divine attributes and capacity were absolutely essential for Him to survive the physically, emotionally, and spiritually taxing Atonement in all its infinite complexities. “And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death” (Mosiah 3:7). During the experience of the Atonement, the Savior went through extreme pain and suffering, “which suffering caused [Himself], even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain” (D&C 19:18). King Benjamin teaches that we could not experience this type of pain because a mere mortal would die before ever reaching the necessary point of extremity (see Mosiah 3:7). In the words of Elder Henry B. Eyring, “He worked out the Atonement . . . [that] was so painful and so terrible that we cannot comprehend it.”<sup>7</sup>

Any attempts made by us to duplicate and therefore understand by experience what Christ went through is



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simply not possible because we are mortals, not Gods. All of our possible strengths combined would fall far short of what the Atonement required. Again, Amulek explains “it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice,” which “sacrifice will be the Son of God” (Alma 34:10, 14) to satisfy the Atonement’s requirements.

### THE COMPREHENSIBLE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT

We have addressed several aspects of the Atonement that are incomprehensible to us. But is there anything about the Atonement that is comprehensible? The qualified answer is yes—parts of it.

One might wonder if it is even worthwhile to try to comprehend the Atonement because, after all, we are imperfect and mortal beings. But that is precisely the point. Because we are imperfect and mortal, we desperately need to comprehend how the Atonement affects us now. We find in the scriptures the commandment given by God to “come unto Christ . . . and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption” (Omni 1:26), and to “be reconciled unto him [Heavenly Father] through the atonement of Christ, his Only Begotten Son” (Jacob 4:11). A degree of comprehension, then, must be both possible and attainable, for we are told that the Lord will not give commandments to us unless it is possible to keep those commandments (see 1 Nephi 3:7; 17:50).

God tells us further that when He asks us to do something and promises blessings dependent on our obedience, then “he will fulfil all his promises which he

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shall make unto you” (Alma 37:17) because “he never doth vary from that which he hath said” (Mosiah 2:22). So when He says to come unto Him and be reconciled through His Atonement, we must trust that there is a way for us to do just that and that God will help us fulfill that command.

We are told further that obtaining eternal life depends on us knowing Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ (see John 17:3; D&C 132:24). Knowing is a combination of learning about Christ and His ways and learning to do what He would do (see D&C 130:18–19). In our quest to comprehend the Atonement and to enjoy its blessings now, Heavenly Father has given us principles, doctrines, ordinances, and other tools to help us.

## THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

Stepping-stones are laid out before us to help us understand the Atonement and utilize its power; the scriptures call these stepping-stones “the doctrine of Christ,” or more simply “the gospel” (see 2 Nephi 31:21; Jacob 7:6). “This is the way; and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God. And now, behold, *this is the doctrine of Christ*” (2 Nephi 31:21; emphasis added).

The doctrine of Christ is described concisely in 2 Nephi 31 (see also 3 Nephi 11) and even more concisely in the Fourth Article of Faith. It entails faith, repentance, covenant making (in particular, baptism), receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end of this life.

*Faith.* One of our most acute challenges on this earth is to learn to trust that Jesus lived and that His Atonement

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was a real event which can have actual effect on our lives. As part of this process, we realize that we cannot comprehend everything. But Christ “comprehendeth all things” (D&C 88:41). The Savior understands the arithmetic of the infinite, and because He does, it is our test and challenge to trust that He knows and to keep moving forward and acting according to His will (see 1 Nephi 7:12). This process is what we call having “faith in Christ” (Enos 1:8).

The prophet Alma described this process with the analogy of a seed. He said that planting the word of God in our hearts is like planting a seed. Once the seed is planted, we cannot see it until after we have watered and nourished it. The seed then swells, sprouts, and starts to grow (see Alma 32:27–30). Alma went on to say that we should simply “begin to believe in the Son of God” and “plant this word in your hearts, and as it beginneth to swell even so nourish it by your faith. And behold, it will become a tree, springing up in you unto everlasting life. And then may God grant unto you that your burdens may be light, through the joy of his Son” (Alma 33:22–23). Trusting that Jesus’s Atonement can free us from otherwise unbearable burdens is one of the great joys of the doctrine of Christ, of which faith is one of the founding principles.

*Repentance.* A natural result of a belief in Christ is a desire to repent or change; “therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption” (Alma 34:16). We are placed here on earth in a “state to act according to [our own] wills and pleasures” (Alma 12:31). That means, among other things, that we must choose to repent. Repentance is our part of the equation, while forgiveness is God’s. The

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“plan of redemption could not be brought about, only on conditions of repentance of men” (Alma 42:13). The act of receiving the cleansing and healing power of the Atonement must begin with our individual decision to repent.

*Making covenants.* As we exercise faith and change through repentance, we desire to bind ourselves to God to be called by the name of His Son, Jesus Christ (see 2 Nephi 31:13). The first covenant we make is baptism, “a witness and a testimony before God, and unto the people, that [we have] repented and received a remission of [our] sins” (3 Nephi 7:25). Entering this covenant shows that we will “serve him and keep his commandments,” which leads Him to fulfill His promise that “he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon [us]” (Mosiah 18:10).

*The gift of the Holy Ghost.* Our willingness to have faith in Jesus Christ, to repent of our sins, and to make covenants that bind us to God opens us up to receive one of the greatest gifts that God has to offer on this earth—the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost, a member of the Godhead, can reveal all things to us and provide us with comfort (see John 14:26; 2 Nephi 32:5; D&C 20:28). But with regard to the power of the Atonement, one of the most stunning parts that the gift of the Holy Ghost plays takes place after we repent and are baptized by water: “Then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 31:17). There could not be any greater blessing than to have our sins burned away by the fire that the Holy Ghost represents. The peace and joy which follow this

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cleansing power help us to understand the immediate and powerful effects of the Atonement of Christ.

### OUR ACTIONS

If recognizing the technical processes of the Atonement is all that we needed for salvation, then one would expect that characters such as Laman and Lemuel, or even Lucifer, would be assured of salvation because they knew of Christ and of what He did. Many people think that getting to know Jesus Christ is only a cognitive process, while in other matters they recognize the necessity both of knowing the facts about a particular process and of knowing the process through experience. Likewise, the scriptures promise that “if any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God” (John 7:17). Three foundational actions will lead us to know the doctrine of Christ and will therefore help us gain access to the power of the Atonement: reading the scriptures, praying, and obeying the commandments.

*Reading the scriptures.* The simplest way for us to begin to understand Jesus Christ and His Atonement is by reading and studying what has been written about Him in scripture. We were not on the earth during Christ’s mortal ministry, so we read and study the words of prophets who did live with Him and who have seen Him. The scriptures become an invaluable and consistent resource in our journey to “press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:20). As John explained, we should “search the scriptures . . . [because] they are they which testify of [Christ]” (John

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5:39). Our efforts to “lay hold upon the word of God . . . [will] divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course” (Helaman 3:29).

*Praying.* We pray to our Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ. We use this pattern because while we go to our Father in Heaven to ask for forgiveness, it is granted according to His will through the Atonement of His Son (see Mosiah 4:10). Enos knew that just wishing that his sins would be forgiven would not bring about absolution; instead, he needed to pray and use his agency to ask for that forgiveness (see Enos 1:4). Through prayer we gain access to the doors of heaven—only Satan, who knows that prayer is a means by which we can reach God, would keep us from praying (see 2 Nephi 32:8–9). It is through prayer that our souls access God and find rest from the weight of sin. The Nephites during the time of Helaman understood this connection well, for “they did fast and pray oft . . . unto the filling their souls with joy and consolation, yea, even to the purifying and the sanctification of their hearts” (Helaman 3:35).

*Obedying the commandments.* In its simplest form, obedience entails doing what Heavenly Father has asked us to do. Heavenly Father most often asks us to do certain things by issuing commandments. “And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:21). Choosing to obey God, or using our will to do the will of God, is what opens up to us a reservoir of blessings, of which foremost is the blessing of forgiveness through the Atonement. A person can gain more knowledge and intelligence in this

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life, particularly of the Atonement, by choosing to obey the commandments God has given us (see D&C 130:19). “Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life,” or in other words, to Jesus Christ, the Savior (Revelation 22:14; see also 1 Nephi 11:9, 21–22). These are some of the fundamental tools given to us from a loving Heavenly Father to guide us in accessing the cleansing and healing power of the Atonement.

## “HOW IS IT DONE?”

We read the familiar story of Enos, son of the prophet Jacob, who wanted desperately to receive a remission of his sins. In response to his lengthy petition for forgiveness, Enos heard the voice of God declare, “Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee” (Enos 1:5). Enos was certainly grateful for the mercy of God through the Atonement of His Son, but he still wondered, “Lord, how is it done?” (Enos 1:7). How does the life and experience of one person, even God, provide forgiveness to someone else who has sinned? While the specifics of how God performed these acts were still incomprehensible to Enos, the process was explained to him. The Lord’s response was, “Because of thy faith in Christ” (Enos 1:7–8). Enos learned that his acceptance of the doctrine of Christ led to a remission of his sins and to a comprehension of the process by which that remission took place.

Enos exercised his faith by asking for forgiveness. Repentance was evidenced in his “wrestl[ing]” and “soul hunger[ing]” (Enos 1:2, 4). His covenants were manifested by actions associated with the name of Christ, specifically

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prayer. And the Holy Ghost was his attendant through the process (see Enos 1:2, 4, 5, 10). Most of what we learn and comprehend in this life comes from our five senses—seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting. However, communication with and subsequent learning from the Holy Ghost involves a different sense.<sup>8</sup> The Holy Ghost may not be easily defined in the same terms we use to define our other five senses, but it is nevertheless as real and immutable as those senses.

An example from King Benjamin helps us to understand the part the Holy Ghost plays in utilizing the Atonement's power more effectively. The people of King Benjamin, upon hearing the word of God, became aware that they had sinned and that they absolutely needed the blessing of forgiveness. They "viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth," and their prayer was, "O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins" (Mosiah 4:2). Like Enos, King Benjamin's people wanted the mercy of the Lord to allow the atoning blood of Jesus Christ to be effective personally and immediately. That atoning forgiveness came through the Holy Ghost: "After they had spoken these words the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience" (Mosiah 4:3). They had been forgiven through the Holy Ghost, and their evidence of forgiveness was the peace and joy that accompanied the remission of their sins.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ makes forgiveness of sin possible. But it is the Holy Ghost, the third member of the Godhead, who provides the activating and cleansing



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power of the Atonement for each individual. The same means by which the Atonement was applied to each of King Benjamin’s people is the same means by which it is applied to each of us. In Elder Henry B. Eyring’s words, “If you have felt the influence of the Spirit this day, . . . you may take it as evidence that the Atonement is working in your life.”<sup>9</sup>

Is the Atonement incomprehensible? In one sense, it is incomprehensible because it is infinite in nature; it is all-inclusive (sufficient for all of the sins, inadequacies, and physical deaths of men); and performed by God. All these aspects of the Atonement cannot be intimately or comprehensively understood in this mortal life. What we can understand now are the doctrines, the tools, and the process needed to access the healing and cleansing effects of the Atonement. Though we may not yet be like God, the Atonement and its attendant blessings are real and available now through the power of the Holy Ghost (see D&C 59:23).

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 3:30.
2. The scriptures speak of the “unpardonable sin” (Jacob 7:19; Alma 39:6) in which a person has sinned severely against the Holy Ghost. The scriptures teach that these few individuals will be “the only ones who shall not be redeemed in the due time of the Lord” to a kingdom of glory (D&C 76:38; see also D&C 76:32–38; Hebrews 6:4–6;

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Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976], 358).

3. A similar discussion on this subject was offered by Stephen E. Robinson in *Believing Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 26.
4. For those who murder there is no forgiveness in this life. After this life and after they have suffered for their sin in hell, it is possible for them to receive redemption in the telestial world, but they cannot receive the exaltation of the celestial world (see D&C 76:81–86; D&C 138:58–59; Alma 5:21; Boyd K. Packer, “The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 18; Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 339).
5. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 569.
6. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Purifying Power of Gethsemane,” *Ensign*, May 1985, 10.
7. Henry B. Eyring, “Spiritual Preparedness: Start Early and Be Steady,” *Ensign*, November 2005, 38.
8. Boyd K. Packer, “Revelation in a Changing World,” *Ensign*, November 1989; see also Richard G. Scott, “Helping Others to Be Spiritually Led,” in *Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Symposium, 11–13 August 1998* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 2.
9. Henry B. Eyring, “Gifts of the Spirit for Hard Times,” *CES Fireside for Young Adults*, September 10, 2006, Brigham Young University.