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THE ATONEMENT OF JESUS CHRIST: "GLAD TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY"

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The Book of Mormon teaches the power of the Atonement with greater light and understanding than any other book. One reason we have been repeatedly invited to read daily from the Book of Mormon is that it plainly teaches the Atonement's application in our lives and shows its effects on those who truly come unto Christ and "apply [His] atoning blood" (Mosiah 4:2). Of all the principles and doctrines outlined for us to abide by in the Book of Mormon, none brings more joy than the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Nephi declares with great clarity the intent of the writers of the Book of Mormon: "For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to *believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God*; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do. . . . And we talk of Christ, we *rejoice* in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to *what source they may look for a remission of their sins*" (2 Nephi 25:23, 26; emphasis added).

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In teaching the Atonement, the Book of Mormon prophets make plain the agonies of Christ's suffering in our behalf (see Alma 7:11–13; Mosiah 3:7; 2 Nephi 2:21; 1 Nephi 11; Mosiah 14). They make equally clear, however, that the intent of the Atonement is to lift our hearts and minds to the joy that comes as a result of applying the atoning blood in our lives so that we might “sing the song of redeeming love” (Alma 5:26). Just as God's church in the latter days does not use the cross as a symbol of faith, the Book of Mormon emphasizes the life-giving power of the Atonement, not merely the agony of what Christ suffered. In the limited pages of this chapter, we will look to see the “glad tidings of great joy” (Mosiah 3:3) taught by the Book of Mormon prophets. Not only do they lift our minds with hope that we can receive a remission of our sins through the Atonement, but they also show us how to apply the atoning blood in our lives to allow His love and saving power to reach us. This leads us to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him” (Moroni 10:32), that we may obtain a fullness of joy.

Many years ago I witnessed a presentation on the Atonement that focused solely on the suffering of Christ, including a graphic display of the agony of crucifixion. I left feeling that in seeing only the suffering, we had lost the love and missed the message of the Atonement. Since that time I have struggled to put into words the hope, love, and joy I have felt as I have studied the Atonement from the pages of the Book of Mormon. I have come to see that finding joy in the Atonement is something that must be understood in the heart and not with some kind of scholarly understanding. It is a personal journey that we each must pursue for ourselves.¹ The Atonement by nature is *infinite*, but hope and joy come through its redeeming power only as our connection to God becomes *intimate*. President Boyd K. Packer stated, “You should learn while you are young that while the Atonement of Christ applies to humanity in general, the influence of it is individual, very personal, and very useful. Even to you beginners, an understanding of the Atonement is of immediate and very practical value in everyday life.”²

In my teenage years, I had a close friend who, like many of us, did not yet understand the full joy of the Atonement. When sixteen years old, he had a dream in which he met a heavenly personage in a deserted city park. In the visions of the night, the personage looked him in the

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eye, embraced him, and told him that he had some difficult trials to face in his life. He told this young man that he would need to remember the love and joy he felt at this moment and know that the Savior knew, understood, and loved him.

About six months later, this young man was driving with some friends when a momentary lapse in judgment caused a terrible accident, rolling the car several times. All of his friends were seriously injured, one barely clinging to life in an intensive-care unit. During the week that followed, the young man fasted that his friend would live. He spent entire nights praying, seeking the Savior's healing power to preserve the life of his friend. He returned again and again to the park where his dream had taken place, hoping beyond hope that he would receive some sort of divine answer to his pleadings.

Then his friend passed away. In despair, the young man lost faith for a time. He felt the Lord had not answered his prayers. He felt alone, abandoned, and separated from God by the guilt that he felt over causing the death of one of his best friends.

Eventually, with support from family and friends and after much searching of the scriptures, he found the reconciliation he had been seeking. He came to understand that through the Atonement, death was not the end for his friend. He was reminded of the Savior's love and came to see that His Atonement was not just for sin, but for mistakes, guilt, and the challenges of the heart. He at last understood that the Atonement provides an enabling power to our lives that allows us to go forward with faith and feel joy once again.

JOY IN THE BEGINNING

From our first beginnings, Christ's Atonement gave us hope that we could come to earth and overcome the challenges of this mortal existence and obtain a fullness of joy (see Alma 13:1–12). Living in the presence of God, we learned that without a physical body we could not receive a fulness of joy (see D&C 93:29–35). To obtain a body, we would need to come to earth and experience mortality. As the plan unfolded regarding the need for a Savior and the separation that would take place because of sin, we became fully aware of the unlimited capacity required of Him who would fulfill the role of Redeemer. When

Christ stood to accept the role as Savior, it was not simply the offering of a kind, wishful brother. Through the eons and eternities, He alone had lived fully every word that our Father in Heaven had instructed, and He had attained a fullness of light. Not only was He willing to perform the role of Redeemer but He also possessed the ability to fulfill such an infinite task. He was in very deed the Word of God (see John 1:1–3).

Some of us showed exceeding great faith in the Word and the redemption that would come through Christ's Atonement. As spirit children of God, we were witnesses of His infinite goodness. We felt His great love for us. With this evidence as the foundation of our faith, we chose to follow Him. We exercised faith in His ability to fulfill God's plan and were thus allowed to come to earth. We knew He was the only one with the infinite capacity and love to do as He promised. From the foundation of the world, Christ was prepared to redeem all those who would believe on His name that we might receive joy (see Alma 22:13–15). Elder Bruce R. McConkie explains: "He who was beloved and chosen from the beginning then became the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world; he was then chosen and foreordained to be the One who would work out the infinite and eternal atonement. 'Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people,' he said to the brother of Jared. 'Behold, I am Jesus Christ.' (Ether 3:14.) And so before mortal men were, before Adam fell that men might be, before there was mortality and procreation and death—before all this, provision was made for the redemption."³

The knowledge of Christ's atoning power taught to us in our pre-mortal existence penetrated deep into the fiber of our spirits and became engraved in the spiritual countenances of those who believed in Christ (see Alma 5:14). This knowledge provided a light for all of us who chose to follow our Father's plan and enabled us to discern good from evil in order to see our way through our mortal existence. With this light, we took courage and were confident that we could make the journey to earth and return home to our Father. The Light of Christ was given to every one of us that we might be persuaded to "lay hold upon every good thing" so that we could become as our Father in Heaven (see Moroni 7:15–25). It was this knowledge planted deep in

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our souls that caused the morning stars to sing together and all the sons of God to shout for joy (see Job 38:6–7).

THAT WE MIGHT HAVE JOY

With the hope of eternal glory and the joy of Christ's light within, all who followed God's plan have been permitted to receive a body and come to earth. To learn the lessons of godliness, however, it was necessary that an opposition be provided. Though the truth of Christ was embedded in our hearts, a veil was placed upon our minds so that we could learn to choose for ourselves whether we would follow that light within us. From the beginning, the Lord God had given unto us our agency so we could act for ourselves. We could not act for ourselves unless we had opposition from which to choose (see 2 Nephi 2:11, 15–16). To introduce choice into the world, Adam and Eve were provided with the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in opposition to the fruit of the tree of life. When they partook of the forbidden fruit, the Fall made it possible for us to come to the earth to obtain joy "through the great Mediator of all men" (2 Nephi 2:27). The Fall did not introduce joy into the world, but as a result of the Fall, Adam, Eve, and the rest of mankind can know the joy of redemption through the Atonement of Christ (see Moses 5:10–11).

We cannot truly understand or appreciate the Atonement until we first understand the Fall. President Ezra Taft Benson taught, "Just as a man does not really desire food until he is hungry, so he does not desire the salvation of Christ until he knows why he needs Christ. No one adequately and properly knows why he needs Christ until he understands and accepts the doctrine of the Fall and its effect upon all mankind."⁴ Without trying to expound all of the doctrinal implications of the Fall, we must use the Fall to gain some perspective relative to our need for the Atonement.

Alma the Younger uses this approach in teaching his wayward son, Corianton (see Alma 41–42). He taught that when Adam partook of the fruit, man "became lost forever, yea, they became fallen man, . . . cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord; and thus we see they became subjects to follow after their own will" (Alma 42:6–7). Alma further teaches that man "had become carnal, sensual,

and devilish, by nature. . . . If it were not for the plan of redemption, . . . as soon as they were dead their souls were miserable, being cut off from the presence of the Lord. And now, there was no means to reclaim men from this fallen state, which man had brought upon himself because of his own disobedience” (Alma 42:10–12). At the conclusion of his teachings, Alma reassured his son that because of the Atonement, the effects of the Fall could be completely overcome and mercy could claim all who will come and “partake of the waters of life freely” (Alma 42:27).

While Adam’s Fall brought us into a world filled with the nature and disposition to do evil, it is our conscious following of that nature that causes us to fall and separates us from God. Preaching to the priests of King Noah, Abinadi taught: “All mankind [became] carnal, sensual, devilish, knowing evil from good, subjecting themselves to the devil. Thus all mankind were lost; and behold, they would have been endlessly lost were it not that God redeemed his people from their lost and fallen state. But remember that *he that persists in his own carnal nature, and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion against God, remaineth in his fallen state* and the devil hath all power over him. Therefore he is as though there was no redemption made, being an enemy to God” (Mosiah 16:3–5; emphasis added).

In our carnal and fallen state, our sinful nature becomes contrary to that God who gave us life and offends the spirit inside of us, robbing us of joy. Alma explains that “all men that are in a state of nature, or . . . in a carnal state, are in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity; they are without God in the world, and they have gone contrary to the nature of God; therefore, they are in a state contrary to the nature of happiness” (Alma 41:11). You cannot do wrong and feel right. Without Christ’s Atonement for our sins, our spirits would become subject to the devil, and “we [would] 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” (2 Nephi 9:9). With no Atonement to overcome our spiritual death, we would be left forever in a state of misery.

Without the Atonement, the effects of the Fall would be total and irrevocable. Mankind would be lost temporally and spiritually, without resurrection or repentance, forever separated from God. The “natural

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man” would remain an “enemy to God . . . forever and ever” without the power to become a saint (Mosiah 3:19). Thus estranged, we would be unable to become at one with God and obtain any kind of joy. Truly there had to be an infinite Atonement to overcome the effects of the Fall and make us at one again with God, bringing us a fullness of joy.

Throughout the Book of Mormon, the Atonement is taught side by side with the precept of the Fall (see 2 Nephi 2, 9; Mosiah 3–4, 13–16, 27; Alma 11–12, 33–34, 36, 41–42), showing clearly that Christ’s Atonement has overcome the effects of the Fall for all who will take advantage of its redeeming power. Understanding and abiding by this precept can give us the strength to overcome the challenges that come as a part of our mortal existence and experience the joy provided by the enabling power of Christ.

THE JOY OF RESURRECTION

Physical death is one of the great challenges that we all face in mortality. Through the Resurrection, Christ overcame the separation caused by death (see 2 Nephi 9:4; Alma 42:23; Helaman 14:15–17), making us at one again physically with our Heavenly Father and giving us the “oil of joy for mourning” (Isaiah 61:3). Since one individual and not each individual person brought death upon mankind, one individual is responsible for overcoming that death (see 1 Corinthians 15:20–22).⁵ The Resurrection blesses all the children of God who ever had or would come to earth to gain a physical body (see Alma 11:42–45). This doctrine provides great hope and comfort to all of us who have lost loved ones, just as in the case of my young friend mentioned earlier (see also Alma 28:12).

ABILITY TO SUCCOR HIS PEOPLE

Along with overcoming the physical death brought about through Adam’s Fall, Christ can also overcome the effects of our personal fall that we bring upon ourselves through sin. While having been taught this idea from our youth, many of us may wonder how Christ can truly understand and atone for our sins when during His mortal journey, Christ lived without ever going against the divine light inside Him. We are told in modern revelation, “He received not of the fulness at first,

but *continued from grace to grace*, until he received a fulness” (D&C 93:13; emphasis added). Without ever sinning, how then was He to comprehend all that we feel and experience and thus be able to atone for our sins and give help in time of need?

Just as Moses had been shown all the inhabitants of the earth by the Spirit of God (see Moses 1:27–28), in one of the most supremely intimate aspects of the Atonement, Christ was shown all those for whom He would atone (see Mosiah 14:10; 15:10–12). Elder Merrill J. Bateman taught, “The Atonement involved more than an infinite mass of sin; it entailed an infinite stream of individuals with their specific needs.”⁶ To see and understand according to the Spirit, however, was not sufficient for the Atonement Christ sought to make in our behalf. After comprehending all things by the Spirit, Christ also suffered *according to the flesh* the afflictions, temptations, sins, pain, infirmities, and sicknesses of all mankind, “that he may know *according to the flesh how to succor his people*” (Alma 7:12; emphasis added).

Christ’s suffering “according to the flesh” allowed him to comprehend every person and every need so that He could make peace between God and us. The “at-one-ment” worked in both directions. Before the Atonement could make us at one with God again, *Christ had to be at one with us*, sharing in all of our sorrows, sins, disappointments, and heartaches. Yet with all of the temptations, trials, and adversity of the world upon Him while in the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ “resisted unto blood” (Hebrews 12:4) that He might not let sin into His being. In the words of Elder Neal A. Maxwell, “Jesus partook of history’s bitterest cup without becoming bitter!”⁷ It is from this perspective that Paul tells us, “We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities [or unable to sympathize with our frailties and imperfections]; but was in all points tempted like as we are, *yet without sin*” (Hebrews 4:15; emphasis added). Only by passing beneath all things could Christ lift us out of all things, showing us how to live in a godly way through every circumstance of mortality (see D&C 88:6).

To pay the price for sin, He had to first comprehend all things and then overcome all things. Christ’s infinite payment encompassed all that each individual in the whole of mankind would suffer. Such

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suffering caused even a God “to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore” (D&C 19:18). He paid more than any person would need or require. Justice was to be completely satisfied for every person who would come unto Christ. In suffering the agony of Gethsemane and the cross,⁸ His flesh became “subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father . . . giving the Son power to make intercession for the children of men” (Mosiah 15:7–8). Isaiah added, “He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; . . . he was wounded for our transgressions; . . . the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:3–5). This principle brings us joy in the knowledge that there is someone who knows and understands all that we can possibly suffer and can help us to overcome.

THE BROKEN HEART

Although the Book of Mormon teaches us the magnitude of Christ’s suffering, it is not the Lord’s desire that we merely feel sorry for what He suffered or simply cause us to fear the retribution of unrepentant sin. True comprehension of the Atonement from the perspective of His sufferings breaks our hearts so that we become humble, teachable, and willing to repent, filled with the hope that “joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5). Unfortunately, many of us misunderstand this idea and choose to beat ourselves up for what we have caused the Savior to suffer. Instead of coming to Him with a broken heart and contrite spirit, we shrink from His healing arms, which are outstretched to provide us comfort and protection from the law of justice (see 2 Nephi 2:6–10; 7:1–2; 3 Nephi 10:4–6; Alma 42:12–23). We clench our fists and determine that we will never again cause Him such pain. Instead of becoming one with Him in our hurtful state, we attempt to make it right on our own. We somehow try to pay the price of sin for ourselves rather than cause Him to suffer. We ache to pay for that which we have done that we might be clean.

Eternal law, however, does not allow the offering of something imperfect to pay for imperfection. We are unable to pay the full price necessary to be made whole. It is true that we may suffer because of our sins, and we may even suffer for our sins, but we cannot, in the end,

remove our sins. Because we are still unclean, the punishment that is affixed to answer the ends of the law of justice requires that we be cut off from the presence of God (see 2 Nephi 2:5–10; 1 Nephi 15:24). We are trapped. We find ourselves “in the grasp of justice, . . . consigned . . . forever to be cut off from his presence” (Alma 42:14). Lost and cut off, we plead for mercy, but mercy requires an infinite sacrifice to satisfy justice and pay the price that we cannot pay. Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught:

This, then, is the doctrine of the divine Sonship. It took our Lord’s mortal and his immortal powers to work out the atonement, for that supreme sacrifice required both death and resurrection. There is no salvation without death, even as there is no salvation without resurrection. Thus Amulek, speaking of this “great and last sacrifice,” says it could not be “a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice. Now there is not any man that can sacrifice his own blood which will atone for the sins of another.” (Alma 34:10–11.) Man cannot resurrect himself; man cannot save himself; human power cannot save another; human power cannot atone for the sins of another. The work of redemption must be infinite and eternal; it must be done by an infinite being; God himself must atone for the sins of the world.⁹

Truly, “there was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.”¹⁰ Only through the infinite offering of Christ can our garments be “washed white through the blood of the Lamb” (Alma 13:11). With beautiful and heart-breaking light, President Boyd K. Packer declares: “There are times you cannot mend that which you have broken. . . . Perhaps the damage was so severe that you cannot fix it no matter how desperately you want to. Your repentance cannot be accepted unless there is a restitution. If you cannot undo what you have done, you are trapped. . . . Restoring what you cannot restore, healing the wound you cannot heal, fixing that which you broke and you cannot fix is the very purpose of the atonement of Christ. When your desire is firm and you are willing to pay the ‘uttermost farthing,’ *the law of restitution is suspended.*

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Your obligation is transferred to the Lord. He will settle your accounts.””

As we come unto Christ with true godly sorrow, He settles our accounts with the law of justice, making our garments white, or in other words, we become clean so that guilt is swept away (see Enos 1:4–8). God does not desire that we continually harrow ourselves up by the memory of our sins but desires that we accept His mercy in our behalf. The prophet Zenos taught, “Thou art angry, O Lord, with this people, because they will not understand thy mercies which thou hast bestowed upon them because of thy Son” (Alma 33:16).

Through the eternal gift of the Atonement, mercy can indeed satisfy the demands of justice and encircle us in the “arms of safety” (Alma 34:16). Unlike the gift of resurrection, however, which comes freely and universally to all in overcoming the physical effects of Adam’s Fall, this gift must be obtained by following the path outlined by the Savior. This path consists of the basic principles of the gospel. First, we must exercise faith that He is both able and willing to atone for us (see Alma 33:1, 22–23). Next, we must come unto Him with a broken heart and contrite spirit and be willing to do whatever is necessary to obtain mercy and forgiveness (see Alma 22:13–15). We must then willingly enter into a covenant with Him to always remember Him and keep His commandments (see Mosiah 5:5–9). As we enter, live, and renew our covenants, we receive the baptism of fire, or the gift of the Holy Ghost, which brings a remission of our sins (see 2 Nephi 31:10–18). Coming to Him this way, we feel and comprehend His healing power both in our minds and in our hearts. We “remember [our] pains no more” and are “harrowed up by the memory of [our] sins no more” (Alma 36:19), leaving us filled with unspeakable joy.

THE RECONCILED HEART

As we follow the path outlined by the Savior to obtain His mercy and have our sins remitted, our hearts are reconciled unto God and our divine potential is restored. We become His sons and daughters, striving once again to be as He is. These feelings are expressed in a poem called “Reconciled”:

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*The veil is parted, allowing me in; the light of God shows what is within
 This hallowed room within my soul where godliness dwells and I am whole.
 From the world's call I am free, and I see the me I want to be;
 On holy ground I ponder long the path to which I truly belong.
 Am I to be a celestial soul? Or merely dream of a godly goal?
 Then He appears and I can see—to be like Him is what I should be,
 But I see reflected in His eyes what my soul cannot disguise,
 The things I've done that marred my soul; I'm less than godly, incomplete—
 not whole.
 There comes an ache into my heart—He knows, He sees, my ugly part.
 I begin to turn my face away—What can I do, what can I say?
 I've tried so hard to heed the call to follow Him, but still I fall.
 With head bowed low, I humbly plea, "Please, dear Lord, have mercy on me!"
 Then I feel His love; I see His face; I feel His arms in warm embrace.
 Healing light fills my soul, and once again I'm godly—I am whole.
 The godly child that lies within is now pure and free from sin,
 Reconciled to God above by atoning power and the Savior's love.¹²*

This cleansing and removal of sin leaves us filled with humility and gratitude to a loving Savior. Certainly He has atoned for our sins in every sense of the word. Both the Hebrew (*kāphar*) and the Greek (*katalagē*) words for *atonement* help us to understand the Savior's role in overcoming sin and reconciling us to God.¹³ Forgiveness alone, however, does not leave us finished, complete, and filled with the joy we came to earth to obtain (see 2 Nephi 2:25; 31:19). In the final judgment, it is not simply a cover for our sin that we seek in repenting through the Atonement. For a complete and full restitution to our godly nature, not only must the sin be removed but our desire for the sin, or carnal nature, must be removed and the divine nature we possessed before our fall must be restored.

Elder Bruce C. Hafen taught: "The Savior asks for our repentance not merely to compensate him for paying our debt to justice, but also as a way of inducing us to undergo the process of development that will make our nature divine, giving us the capacity to live the celestial law. The 'natural man' will remain an enemy to God forever—even after paying for his own sins—unless he also 'becometh a saint through the

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atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child.' . . . The Atonement does more than pay for our sins. It is also the agent through which we develop a saintly nature."¹⁴

At our deepest level, we desire a literal change of our nature that unites us with God, making us as He is. In modern English, the Christian intent of the word *atonement* means literally "the state of union with God in which man exemplifies the attributes of God."¹⁵ This kind of union must reach infinitely to every cell of our body, every thought of our mind, and every desire of our heart. Our spiritual genes desire the state of holiness that we witnessed in the beginning with the Father. We desire to have the "natural man" removed and be brought to a "divine nature" (see Mosiah 3:19; 2 Peter 1:3–4). It is this change of our nature—more than a change in desires—that goes beyond our own capacity. Such a change can only be brought about by an infinite atonement.

President David O. McKay taught: "Human nature *can* be changed, here and now." He continued, "You can change human nature. No man who has felt in him the Spirit of Christ even for half a minute can deny this truth. . . . You do change human nature, your own human nature, if you surrender it to Christ. Human nature can be changed here and now. Human nature has been changed in the past. Human nature must be changed on an enormous scale in the future, unless the world is to be drowned in its own blood. And only Christ can change it."¹⁶

Herein lies the key to understanding the Atonement. Without its infinite power, not only would we not be able to return to the presence of our Heavenly Father, which is made possible through the Resurrection and forgiveness of sin (see Helaman 14:15–16; Mormon 9:12–13), we would also not have the power to change our nature and therefore could not overcome our inevitable misery in this life or the life to come. Overcoming this natural state and obtaining true joy is more than having the sins committed during our mortal existence removed through repentance. We must have a mighty change of heart that changes our countenance and brings us to hungering and thirsting after righteousness, to true discipleship, and to the process of becoming like Christ in every way.

THE MIGHTY CHANGE OF HEART

As one embraces the true meaning of the Atonement, the Spirit of the Lord allows us in a very spiritually real sense to feel the Savior's embrace and see His love for us in His eyes. Rather than only seeking the Savior at times of repentance, we seek the Lord daily in personal experiences. The heart of the word *Atonement* is "one." It is in the one-on-one experiences in the scriptures that our lives are truly changed (see 3 Nephi 11:14–17). The Atonement becomes an intimate personal relationship when we come unto Him and seek His healing power, whatever the circumstance may be (see 3 Nephi 17:5–22). While we cannot physically experience the feelings of the Savior, by the same spirit that opened the minds of Nephi, Jacob, Isaiah and other prophets we can experience spiritual oneness with the Savior and feel His love for us. By the spirit we can allow His light into our most intimate and difficult challenges and allow Him to show us all things that we must do. It is in these intimate moments that we have a chance to feel His love for us in every fiber of our soul and experience a mighty change of heart, bringing true joy in its wake.

The people of King Benjamin experienced this mighty change of heart. Directed by an angel to speak to his people so that they might be filled with joy, King Benjamin taught that "with power, the Lord Omnipotent . . . shall come down from heaven, . . . and lo, he cometh unto his own, that salvation might come unto the children of men even through faith on his name" (Mosiah 3:5, 9). He showed them the fallen condition to which they had come. After hearing his teachings, the people viewed themselves in their carnal state and pleaded with one voice, "O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified" (Mosiah 4:2).

These people understood that it was not enough simply to be forgiven of sin. They also understood that payment for sin is not the same as removal of the sinful nature, which causes people to sin. They wanted their hearts changed so that they no longer had any desire for sin. King Benjamin taught them what they must do to always rejoice and retain a remission of their sins. Following their heartfelt plea, "the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a

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remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ” (Mosiah 4:3). Through the mighty change of heart that had been wrought by the Spirit of the Lord, they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).

This change in our nature causes us to shake at the very appearance of sin and to look upon sin with abhorrence (see 2 Nephi 4:31; Alma 13:12). We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ and receive “boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; . . . having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience” (Hebrews 10:19–22). The Lord gives us a new heart so that we may walk in His laws and live the ordinances that He has given us (see Ezekiel 11:19–20; 36:25–28).

PURE LOVE OF CHRIST

How is it possible to effect such a change in the very heart and nature of an individual? What touches a heart so deeply and completely that it not only becomes broken but also changed in its very desires, becoming sanctified and pure, eradicating all desire for sin?

While pondering the Atonement of Jesus Christ, we often focus on what He suffered and the pains He bore. Though His infinite suffering on our behalf may cause our hearts to break, it is not focusing upon His sufferings that will ultimately cause our hearts to become sanctified and godly and bring us joy. Only through experiencing and comprehending God’s love for us can we take on the divine nature of our Father. In His godly, eternal personage is the very radiance of love (see 1 John 4:7–19). This life-changing, godly love is manifested to us in two ways: through our Father’s love in offering His Only Begotten Son and also through the Savior’s love in giving Himself as a willing sacrifice on our behalf (see 2 Nephi 26:24). The Holy Ghost is the great testator of this eternal love felt for us by the Father and the Son. As the Spirit directs our thoughts relative to the Atonement, we feel and comprehend Their love which softens even the hardest of hearts and changes the natural man into a saint. It is in comprehending and experiencing

this love through the Spirit that the infinite power of the Atonement brings a change to our natures and joy to our souls.

Mormon instructs us that this love, known as charity, never fails, that it is the “pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever” (Moroni 7:47). He admonishes us to pray unto our Father in Heaven “with all the energy of heart, that [we] may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that [we] may *become the sons of God*; that when he shall appear we shall *be like him*, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may *be purified even as he is pure*” (Moroni 7:48; emphasis added). Experiencing charity, the true motive behind the Atonement, is truly a matter of the heart. Books may attempt to teach it, but it is not until the Spirit of the Lord touches our hearts that we truly experience this love. Once we feel this love, our hearts are changed and we are eternally bound to our Father through the Savior, and according to the Apostle Paul, there is nothing that can separate us from that love (see Romans 8:35–39; see also Romans 8:1–34).

PROPHETIC JOY

The Book of Mormon witnesses the experiences of many prophets who tasted of this life-changing love of the Savior and obtained joy. Through their writings, the Spirit conveys the eternal love of the Savior and our Father in Heaven, allowing us to feel the joy that it brings. While many prophets might be cited, we will look briefly at the testimony of a few who became intimately acquainted with the Savior, tasted of His love, and taught the joyful message of the Atonement.

Lehi experienced this love and joy in his first vision (see 1 Nephi 1:14) and then again in the vision of the tree of life. In the latter experience, he spoke of the sweetness of the fruit that filled his soul “with exceedingly great joy” and “was desirable above all other fruit” (1 Nephi 8:12). He knew, however, that it was not enough for his family to hear his explanation of what he felt, so he beckoned for them to come and partake of the fruit for themselves. Lehi’s experience teaches us that the love of God must be experienced individually to fill us with joy.

Abinadi taught that while Christ was making His offering in our behalf, He saw His seed, or those who had looked to Him for a

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remission of their sins. He testified that “these are they who have published peace, who have brought good tidings of good” (Mosiah 15:14). When we open our hearts to the love that He felt for us while paying for the very sins that were causing Him such anguish, we join our voice to all those who publish peace and bring good tidings of good (see Mosiah 15:13–18). We sing with the angels “good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people” (Luke 2:10). We are among those who have experienced the great love of God for all His children and are filled with joy.

Alma the Younger came to understand this joy while he lay unconscious for three days. After being “racked, even with the pains of a damned soul” (Alma 35:16), his mind caught hold of his father’s teachings regarding the coming of Jesus Christ and His Atonement for sin. He longed for healing and cried within his heart to have the atoning power applied in his behalf. Echoing the imagery of the tree of life, Alma repeatedly refers to the exquisite and sweet joy that he *tasted* upon receiving this mighty change of heart. Once penetrated by the infinite love of the Savior, Alma’s “soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was [his] pain!” (Alma 36:20). Alma no longer desired to be “extinct both soul and body” (v. 15), but his soul longed to be at one with God.

PERFECTED IN CHRIST

The Atonement of Jesus Christ is indeed the power to cover a multitude of sins, and it is the only way that we can have our sins remitted. But it is more—much more. It is the power by which Christ can effect an actual change in our nature so that we become celestial *by nature* that our joy might be full. The very process of perfection happens through the power of the Atonement of Christ, which is manifested to us through His Spirit. This atoning power overcomes any of those things which rob us of joy in this life: hard feelings that have caused years of separation in families, offenses given or taken, the hurt of a lost loved one, the damage done by abuse and neglect. It is indeed infinite in its capacity to overcome all things, but we must come unto Him and invite the healing power of the Atonement into our lives through repentance. As we worthily partake of the sacrament, Christ’s designated reminder of the Atonement, we are promised that we will always have His Spirit

to be with us. This Spirit testifies to our hearts of His love and atoning power to overcome whatever tribulations may come so that we might have joy (see John 16:33). Without tasting the joy of the Spirit, we find ourselves continually returning to past sins, to past hurt feelings, and to longings for the things of this telestial world. When the spirit of His infinite Atonement permeates our hearts, we lose all desire for anything that separates us from feeling God's love and gain the joy spoken of by the prophets of the Book of Mormon. This joy is to be found not just after we depart this life but also as we continue on our journey in mortality (see Mosiah 2:41).

In his final chapter to the Book of Mormon, Moroni taught that we must "come unto Christ, and *be perfected in him*, and deny [ourselves] of all ungodliness; . . . and love God with all [our] might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for [us], that by his grace [we] may be *perfect in Christ*, . . . if [we] by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are [we] sanctified . . . *through the shedding of the blood of Christ*" (Moroni 10:32–33; emphasis added). Through the grace provided by the Atonement of Christ, we become possessed of the very attributes of God and are at last at one with Him in heart, in mind, and in nature, having a fulness of joy.

NOTES

1. These thoughts are expressed beautifully by Ella Wheeler Wilcox in her poem "Gethsemane," quoted by Vaughn J. Featherstone, "However Faint the Light May Glow," in *Ensign*, November 1982, 72–73.
2. Boyd K. Packer, "Washed Clean," *Ensign*, May 1997, 9.
3. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 110–11.
4. Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants," *Ensign*, May 1987, 83–87.
5. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 69.
6. Merrill J. Bateman, as quoted in W. Jeffrey Marsh, "The Living Reality of the Savior's Mercy," in *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior*, ed. Paul H. Peterson, Gary L. Hatch, and Laura D. Card (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2002), 162.
7. Neal A. Maxwell, "Enduring Well," *Ensign*, April 1997, 7.
8. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Purifying Power of Gethsemane," *Ensign*, May 1985, 10.

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9. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 111–12.
10. “There Is a Green Hill Far Away,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 194.
11. Boyd K. Packer, “The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 19–20.
12. Poem by the author, July 24, 2002.
13. In the Old Testament, *atonement* comes from the Hebrew word *kāphar*, which means literally “to cover . . . ; to expiate or condone, to placate or cancel.” The New Testament Greek word, *katallagē* means “restoration to (the divine) favor:—atonement, reconciliation” (see *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary*, 57, ref. 3722, and *Greek Dictionary of the New Testament*, 40, ref. 2643).
14. Bruce C. Hafen, *The Broken Heart: Applying the Atonement to Life’s Experiences* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 8.
15. *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Portland House, 1989), 95.
16. David O. McKay, *Stepping Stones to an Abundant Life* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 23, 127.