
THE MERITS OF CHRIST: FALLEN HUMANITY'S HOPE FOR REDEMPTION

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As a teacher of youth, I occasionally begin a class by asking the students if they would like to receive what they deserve at the judgment day. The initial response of a few is in the affirmative, but after thinking it over for a moment the class generally concludes that they want something more than they “deserve” when it comes to an eternal reward. While this view might reflect the natural desire to get something for nothing, I believe it also reflects the inward feeling in each of us that holiness, or righteousness, is unattainable without divine assistance. In other words, we are “prone to wander, Lord, [we] feel it, prone to leave the God [we] love.”¹

The Book of Mormon affirms that without the love, mercy, and merits of Christ, our reward in the eternities is not very desirable. Jacob insisted that were it not for the redemption of Christ, we would become “angels to [the] 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). In such a state, “we shall not dare to look up to our God”

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(Alma 12:14) but would rather be put out of His presence forever. Alma felt this shame and horror of getting what he deserved as he struggled under the consciousness of his own guilt and desired banishment instead of coming back into the presence of God to be judged (see Alma 36:12–16).

Understanding men and women’s inability to merit salvation through their own efforts can lead one to rely “alone upon the merits of Christ” (Moroni 6:4). Nephi put it this way: “O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man” (2 Nephi 4:34). Nephi had seen his weak and fallen condition and realized that without the strength of the Lord, he would not be able to overcome the world and his own personal struggles (see 2 Nephi 4:17–19, 26–30). When we see clearly that we are lost and that we need Him, we can be led to rely on His goodness and His grace in our lives.³ This reliance on the merits of Christ involves more than simply passive belief. It includes recognizing our fallen nature and finding access to grace through making and keeping sacred covenants.

THE FALL

One of the foundational doctrines taught in the Book of Mormon is the doctrine of the Fall. It clearly states that the gulf between fallen humanity and a “perfect, just God” (Alma 42:15) is insurmountable without assistance. Lehi taught that “no flesh . . . can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah” (2 Nephi 2:8). Aaron likewise instructed the king of the Lamanites that “since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance, and so forth” (Alma 22:14). Our inability to merit, or deserve, salvation is a result of the Fall and its consequences.

When discussing the Fall, it is important to distinguish between traditional Christianity’s teaching of “original sin” and the restored doctrine of the Fall as taught in the Book of Mormon. For centuries, traditional Christianity has held the belief that little children are

somehow tainted and unclean from birth because of the transgression of Adam and Eve. John Calvin taught that “even infants bringing their condemnation with them from their mother’s womb, suffer not for another’s, but *for their own defect*.”³ John Wesley described the nature of the human race as having a “total loss of righteousness and true holiness which we sustained by the sin of our first parent.”⁴ This attitude about our nature, including the nature of little children, led to practices such as infant baptism as well as a pessimistic view of human nature that seemed to dominate the thinking of Christian scholars and leaders for centuries.⁵

In contrast to this view of a corrupt race, latter-day scripture acknowledges the weakness of humanity without condemning the innocent. The Savior told Mormon through revelation that “little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; wherefore the curse of Adam is taken from them in me” (Moroni 8:8). Mormon also taught that “little children are alive in Christ, even from the foundation of the world” (Moroni 8:12). We further learn from a revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith that “the Lord said unto Adam: Behold I have forgiven thee thy transgression in the Garden of Eden” (Moses 6:53). And also that “the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt, wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children, for they are whole from the foundation of the world” (Moses 6:54).

The Book of Mormon insists that little children and those who “are without the law” are not accountable for their sins because of the merits of Christ and therefore are innocent before God (see Mosiah 3:11, 16; Moroni 8:22). At the same time, those who have reached the years of accountability are guilty of their own sins, which make them unclean. This distinction between the innocence of youth and the accountability of parents is made clear in the Book of Mormon. “This thing shall ye teach—repentance and baptism unto those who are accountable and capable of committing sin; yea, teach parents that they must repent and be baptized, and humble themselves as their little children, and they shall all be saved with their little children” (Moroni 8:10). This exalting of little children was also taught by the Savior while He was in mortality: “At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the

greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1–4).

Even though little children are not condemned by the Fall, all of us are affected by it. This effect shows up most noticeably in the “natural man” as the Book of Mormon calls it (Mosiah 3:19), or “carnal nature” (Mosiah 16:5). By nature, fallen humanity is prone to sin and susceptible to the weakness and temptations of the flesh. King Benjamin taught, “The natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love” (Mosiah 3:19). The Lord taught Adam, “Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good. And it is given unto them to know good from evil; wherefore they are agents unto themselves, and I have given unto you another law and commandment. Wherefore teach it unto your children, that all men, everywhere, must repent, or they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God, for no unclean thing can dwell there, or dwell in his presence” (Moses 6:55–57). From these verses it is apparent that through conception the seeds of a fallen nature are transferred to Adam and Eve’s posterity. These seeds do not condemn children, for the Savior’s Atonement, as mentioned previously, covers for them. However, as the seeds of sin and death germinate in this fallen world, they grow up to take root in men and women’s hearts.

“Because of the fall our natures have become evil continually,” the brother of Jared observed (Ether 3:2). We therefore need to have “this wicked spirit rooted out of [our] breast, and receive [Christ’s] spirit” (Alma 22:15). After experiencing a change of heart, Alma testified: “The Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women . . . must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their

carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; and thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God” (Mosiah 27:25–26).

The Book of Mormon further demonstrates the danger of remaining in this state once we have become accountable and begin to sin. Abinadi taught, “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 16:5; emphasis added). One does not become natural through any particular action but rather as a result of being born into this fallen world and becoming accountable before God.

Though the Fall created a gulf between God and humanity, it was part of the plan from the beginning. Elder Bruce C. Hafen of the Seventy taught:

The Lord restored His gospel through Joseph Smith because there had been an apostasy. Since the fifth century, Christianity taught that Adam and Eve’s Fall was a tragic mistake, which led to the belief that humankind has an inherently evil nature. That view is wrong—not only about the Fall and human nature, but about the very purpose of life.

The Fall was not a disaster. It wasn’t a mistake or an accident. It was a deliberate part of the plan of salvation. We are God’s spirit “offspring,” sent to earth “innocent” of Adam’s transgression. Yet our Father’s plan subjects us to temptation and misery in this fallen world as the price to comprehend authentic joy. Without tasting the bitter, we actually *cannot* understand the sweet. We require mortality’s discipline and refinement as the “next step in [our] development” toward becoming like our Father.⁶

The Fall is therefore a blessing: a step down, yet a step forward on the road to becoming what our Heavenly Father wants us to become.⁷

OBEDIENCE AND COVENANTS

President Joseph F. Smith taught that “obedience is the first law of heaven.”⁸ However, there would be no salvation in obeying the law were it not for Christ. Abinadi insisted that “salvation doth not come by the law alone; and were it not for the atonement, which God himself shall make for the sins and iniquities of his people . . . they must unavoidably perish, notwithstanding [obedience to] the law” (Mosiah 13:28). Even Adam, though he was obedient to the commands issued by the voice of the Lord from Eden, still required an angel to come and teach him the purpose for his obedience and the name by which salvation would be available to his posterity (see Moses 5:4–9).

Obedience is a central part of the Father’s plan of salvation as championed by Christ. By obedience we declare our love for the Lord (see John 14:15) as well as declare our allegiance to the Master we desire to serve (see Mosiah 5:13–15). Obedience is likewise one of the first covenants we make, both through baptism as well as through other sacred ordinances. King Benjamin’s people expressed their willingness to follow Christ: “We are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days” (Mosiah 5:5). Such a commitment to obey His words is vital to both relying on His merits and accessing the power that comes to His sons and His daughters through faith on His name.

Covenants are the Lord’s appointed way of allowing His children access to His grace. Elder John A. Widtsoe taught: “When ordinances are performed, blessings are received which give power to man, power that belongs to the everyday affairs of this life as to a future life. It is not merely knowledge; not merely consecration; not merely a labeling, so to speak; but the actual conferring of power that may be used every day.”⁹

The Book of Mormon has many examples of this pattern of covenant making and the subsequent power that flows into the life of a covenant person. One example is the people of King Benjamin. Upon hearing the gospel taught by their king, this group of good people—remember they had obediently traveled to the temple and had brought sacrifices to offer according to the law of Moses (see Mosiah 2:1–6)—

viewed themselves in their lost and fallen state and saw clearly that they were powerless without divine assistance. They cried out, “O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mosiah 4:2).

It was then, as the Spirit entered into their hearts and their prayers were answered, that they received strength and assistance (see Mosiah 5:2–5). The Spirit also changed their hearts; they were born again as children of Christ, by covenant. As King Benjamin described it, “And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters” (Mosiah 5:7).

CONCLUSION

The doctrine of the merit of Christ as taught in the Book of Mormon is a hopeful doctrine, but to accept it requires humility. It requires us to consider ourselves as “fools before God” (2 Nephi 9:42), as fallen and lost children who have no hope on our own of ever returning to a perfect Father’s presence. At the same time, it is a liberating doctrine, for when it settles in our heart we can truly “lay aside the things of this world, and seek for the things of a better” (D&C 25:10). We can move our hope from *our* righteousness to *His*. In this way we can be confident and not in constant doubt about our own salvation. This is a critical step if we are to serve Him and our fellow beings here on the earth. If our own salvation is a matter of doubt, we cannot extend the kind of mercy, generosity, and forgiveness that we could if we were confident in our salvation through His merits.

Recognition of our inability to merit any good thing on our own (see Mosiah 2:21), as well as recognition of the Savior’s all-sufficient merits, reveals a key to our salvation. It is His goodness, His sacrifice, His righteousness that merit an inheritance for the children of God. His merits and grace are both redemptive and reconstructive to fallen humans. His plan is developmental, and through reliance on His merits we can be saved, which Joseph Smith explained, is to be “assimilated

into their [the Father and Son's] likeness."¹⁰ Without access to His grace and His merits, such a change in fallen men and women would not be possible. With His merits and grace, however, we can become "just men [and women] made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood" (D&C 76:69). Such is the debt we owe to Him and such is His gift to us, if we will rely "alone upon the merits of Christ, who [is] the author and the finisher of [our] faith" (Moroni 6:4).

NOTES

1. "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1948), no. 70.

2. "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" (Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants," *Ensign*, May 1987, 85).

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 2:1:8; emphasis added.

4. John Wesley, "Original Sin" (1759) in *The Sermons of John Wesley: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 334.

5. Augustine was one of the first to have such a view and his teachings spread effectively throughout Christianity (see Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995], 129–31).

6. Bruce C. Hafen, "The Atonement: All for All," *Ensign*, May 2004, 97.

7. Elder Orson F. Whitney taught, "The Fall had a twofold direction—downward, yet forward. It brought man into the world and set his feet upon progression's highway" (*Cowley and Whitney on Doctrine*, comp. Forace Green [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963], 287).

8. Joseph F. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 16:247–48.

9. *The Message of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 161.

10. Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 7:16.