

A decorative border of gold leaf patterns, including leaves and branches, frames the top and bottom corners of the page. The background is a light, textured gold color.

PART TWO

CHRIST, OUR
RANSOM PRICE



*"Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).
Hieronymus Bosch, Christ Carrying the Cross, detail, ca. 1500, Kunsthistorisches
Museum, Vienna. Directmedia Publishing GmbH (CC0 1.0).*

EXPLORING MEDIEVAL IMAGES

The plan of redemption requires a Redeemer, a Redeemer who pays a price to buy his family members out of bondage. We need to trust our Redeemer, and we need to trust his ransom price. When we wonder if we can really escape from whatever traps us, we need to know that we are really forgiven, that we are really free. Even after we make covenants, some part of us may feel that we deserve our punishment, our banishment, our captivity. Some part of us may feel that the forces of chaos and evil will keep us trapped in an existence without peace or hope.

To combat our constant inclination to fear and doubt, our Redeemer paid a price that should be enough to keep us from ever wondering if we are free and if we can move forward out of our prisons. It should be enough to keep us from ever wondering if we are worth something. Our Redeemer gave himself as our Ransom. As Peter said, “Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:

who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world” (1 Peter 1:18–20). That is the plan. It has always been the plan. Christ was foreordained as our ransom price—as our vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice. This plan of redemption is God’s ancient message of hope that he has been trying to communicate through the ages.

Throughout time, God’s ordinances have pointed to the price paid for our deliverance. It is important to participate in the ordinances, but it is even more helpful when we can also behold the ransom price that they point to. Adam was obedient and offered sacrifices without understanding, but when he was given an explanation about why he was offering sacrifices, the angel said, “This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth” (Moses 5:7). The firstlings of their flocks pointed to the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father. Adam and Eve and their descendants needed to continue with the external offerings, but they also needed to *behold* in that physical symbol of a sacrificed animal the death of the Son of God.

Opportunities for repeated practice in beholding the death of Christ were amplified with the law of Moses as the sacrifices became even more nuanced and elaborate. But again, the human tendency to go through the motions without reflecting on the meaning of symbolic action is something that plagued the children of Israel, as it can plague us. It can be easy to believe that our obedience in performing the ordinances is what saves us. This is particularly ironic when we consider that the ordinances themselves are supposed to point to our need for deliverance and redemption. The priests of King Noah were convinced that their obedience saved them, but Abinadi repeated Isaiah’s prophecy of the One who would be “wounded for our transgressions” and “bruised for our iniquities” (Mosiah 14:5). Abinadi declared that “God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people” (Mosiah 15:1). Our Redeemer himself came down to be our Ransom.

If we’re confident since we’ve been baptized and been to the temple that our obedience to those commandments is what has saved us, then we find ourselves missing the point as much as the priests of King Noah.

If we're fearful that we will never be able to keep all the commandments and please God, then we're missing the point too. Our confidence can't be in ourselves. The ordinances are there to point us to Christ and to increase our confidence in the price that he paid as our Redeemer. So our challenge is not just to participate, but to *behold*, to take meaning out of the ordinances, to see them pointing us to Christ's expiatory suffering and death.

In 1 Nephi, chapter 11, Nephi was trying to understand the meaning of the tree his father had seen. He was shown the birth, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. But the way Nephi took meaning out of what he saw, the way he *beheld*, was through the insight of revelation, the revelation of Christ's role as our Ransom. When Nephi "looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms," he was told by the angel: "Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father" (1 Nephi 11:20–21). This revelation of Christ as the Lamb of God, the sacrifice prepared before the creation of the world, allowed Nephi to behold his ministry and death as the great vicarious gifts that they were. Nephi beheld the Lamb of God going forth to be baptized. Nephi beheld the Lamb of God going forth to minister and heal. Nephi didn't just see a human life and death—he "beheld the Lamb of God" taken, judged, and finally "lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world" (11:32–33).

Nephi was able to behold the Father's ancient message of hope in the life and death of Jesus Christ because he beheld him as the Lamb of God, our ransom price. This is the message the Savior stressed in his postmortal ministry; he invited the people at Bountiful to feel his wound marks "that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world" (3 Nephi 11:14). As he defined his gospel, Christ stressed, "I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me. And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross" (3 Nephi 27:13–14). This is the good news. The Lamb of God was "lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world." Before the coming of Christ it took thought and

effort to behold Christ's vicarious sacrifice in the death of animals. In our day we have different ordinances, but the purpose is the same.

In my freshman composition class, we studied travel literature. I had written an essay about Graham Greene's novel *Travels with My Aunt*. My instructor made a comment that I have never forgotten. "You have set up a good frame, but I want to see the picture inside." I had written about the novel without really digging in and analyzing the primary material itself. When we study the gospel, we often do the same thing. We are very excited about the context and the historical details, but the frame sometimes overshadows the picture. We could profitably discuss many specifics about the law of Moses or give details about Christ's historical ministry and the events of his suffering and death, but these are ways of approaching these topics that we have all developed over years of scripture study and Gospel Doctrine classes. If we feel that we're still focusing on the frame and not the picture, then let's come at this from a different angle.

For the purposes of practicing *beholding* the suffering and death of Christ, we don't need more historical details. Even people who saw the historical suffering and death of Christ still needed to look beyond the events to see the meaning of his death as our vicarious substitute. Learning to behold is a critical tool because God's ancient message of hope is primarily communicated through images and symbols. We can get better at beholding. We can get better at seeing Christ as our ransom price in the ordinances and the scriptures, but we have to practice. Developing skills in sports or the arts sometimes comes by isolating a particular skill rather than just continuing to play the game or a piece of music. Our skill in finding meaning in the scriptures and the ordinances can improve with practice as well. When we focus on beholding Christ as the Lamb of God, when we focus closely on his vicarious suffering on our behalf, we can get better at seeing the picture rather than the frame, we can become more attuned to God's ancient message of hope.

To keep our focus on Christ as our Ransom, in this second part of the book I will shift from a more typical path of expanding on Old

Testament symbolism pointing to Christ or telling more about the New Testament setting to instead explore what we can learn from medieval images of Christ. To me, one of the most helpful ways I have found to behold Christ and see the picture within the frame has come from studying medieval religious art. Late medieval religious thought, experience, and artistic expression was squarely focused on Christ's suffering and death. The late medieval emphasis on seeing, being changed by, and embodying Christ's Atonement has messages that resonate strongly in the restored gospel. Exploring the late medieval use of symbolism can help our minds more easily see the symbols in the gospel ordinances and scriptures. It may feel like a detour after our previous discussion of ancient words, but this has been my journey. I finished a master's thesis focused on covenant and redemption in the writings of Paul and was sure that my next step was studying baptism in the early Christian period. But, it's almost like saying, "A funny thing happened on the way to becoming a professor of religious education at BYU–Hawaii." I came to see Christ in the ordinances and scriptures more fully in an unexpected way. Here is some of my story.

After our first year of marriage and my master's degree in ancient Near Eastern studies at BYU, my husband and I were in Southern California for PhD programs. My husband started his program first. I did long-term temporary office work that first year as we had been hoping to have children. I had been working at a law firm as a legal secretary and, while that can be a rewarding profession, I realized it wouldn't be a good fit for me for the rest of my life if I were to keep working. I decided to begin a PhD program and just see what happened as time went on.

I started the Christian history program at Claremont Graduate University the next year. I started studying Coptic and more Greek. During that first semester in graduate school, my husband and I went to Provo, Utah, for a short trip. I was presenting at the Sperry Symposium based on the material in my master's thesis, and we were excited to return for a short visit. While in Provo, we went up to the BYU Bookstore, where I had an experience that changed the direction of my life.

I went to buy a Greek grammar book in the textbook section and, as I picked it up, I had a heavy feeling. It just wasn't making me happy, but I felt dutiful and put it in my shopping basket. I then walked down the row of bookcases along the far wall. Near the end, in a corner, I found a full set of shelves from floor to ceiling filled with books on medieval history and culture. I had such an enormous sensation of enthusiasm and real joy. I stayed and just looked at all those books. Something was happening to me to change what I wanted to do with my doctoral studies. To this day, I have no idea what those books were there for, but I will never forget how I felt looking at them. I told my mother about the experience later, and being a woman very close to the Spirit and spiritual promptings, she asked why I even bought the Greek grammar book.

That is how I came to focus on medieval Christianity in my graduate studies. My background in the ancient Near East and Jerusalem made pilgrimage and sacred place a recurring theme through those studies. I eventually wrote my dissertation on how in the later Middle Ages the Franciscans changed Jerusalem pilgrimage into a meditation on Christ's suffering and death. Many of us are familiar with this influence, having heard of the Via Crucis or Way of the Cross in Jerusalem and also the practice of the Stations of the Cross found in many churches. Starting with this dissertation research, I have spent a lot of time in the last half of my life studying late medieval devotional art and thinking about the role it played in this cultural and religious world.

My professional life now focuses on teaching religious education courses such as the New Testament and Jesus Christ and the Everlasting Gospel, but I am different because of my doctoral studies. I have a deep feeling of respect and appreciation for the message of the love of Christ that the Franciscans shared in the thirteenth, fourteen, and fifteenth centuries. Before I was hired full-time in Religious Education at BYU–Hawaii, I taught as a part-time faculty member of the history departments at both BYU and BYU–Hawaii. In that role I taught what felt like countless sections of the survey course *The World to 1500*, as well

as courses on medieval history. As both a student and a teacher I have thought and taught about the world of the Middle Ages for many years.

Learning that I completed my PhD in religious studies, particularly with an emphasis on the history of Christianity, people often ask if it has affected my testimony. I have always been able to reply that my experiences have helped me to appreciate the Restoration more fully. The insights that I gained from my studies, my teaching, and my own reflections have opened up new insights into both the scriptures and the ordinances. Sometimes stepping back and seeing what we have in the Restoration with fresh eyes allows us to appreciate what we have had all along, but just have not been able to see because it was so familiar that it became invisible. Breaking out of a modern worldview, even briefly, can open us up to insights and perspectives that are embedded in the scriptures and ordinances. The medieval world can, in some ways, be a bridge back to ancient truths and insights. If nothing else, the differences from what we are familiar with can wake us up to see with fresh eyes. I hope that by looking through the lens of late medieval piety together I can share insights that will help you see the love of God manifest in the Restoration. The images of the scriptures, hymns, and ordinances can come alive and gain more power when we behold them and behold Christ in and through them.

In this part of the book, “Christ, Our Ransom Price,” we will explore medieval images with an eye to how they can help us more clearly behold Christ in the scriptures and ordinances. We will start with some background on the role of devotional imagery and relics as a way to connect with the sacred and think about how images and physical connection with the holy are also part of our experience. We will then look at insights and skills of beholding that we can gain from particular types of devotional images: the *Arma Christi*, the imagery of Christ trampling the winepress, the Pietá, and the Man of Sorrows. This section then finishes with an exploration of the symbolism of the stigmata as a way to think about how one can be transformed into the image of Christ by beholding Christ and living a life of discipleship. The insights from medieval images can offer new ways of understanding sacred images and symbols. They provide us

with ways to better behold and focus on Christ in covenants and worship. These images flesh out the spiritual understanding and changes that are embodied in coming to Christ through covenants and ordinances. The conclusion then brings together themes from both the ancient words and medieval images to help us see how connecting with Christ as the True Vine can bring greater joy and life to our journey on the covenant path.