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THE BOOK OF MORMON'S ILLUMINATION ON THE HOURS OF ATONEMENT

Mark Elbert Eastmond

THE MOST FOUNDATIONAL OF ALL CHRISTIAN doctrine is the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that the Son of God came to earth as a man and at the end of His brief sojourn paid the penalty for sin. That Christ paid the horrible price is widely accepted among the many Christian sects and denominations throughout the world. Yet the nature of that price, including the ignominious way the account was settled and the reasons such payment was required, poses a formidable challenge to students of the Bible everywhere. Were it not for the preeminent role of the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, mankind's understanding of the Atonement would be cursory and incomplete. Taken alone, the New Testament gives little detail about the atoning sacrifice beyond a chronology of events. However, within the Book of Mormon we find those events fleshed out, along with an unparalleled doctrinal explanation of *why* Christ suffered and *what* He suffered during the hours of Atonement.

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WHY CHRIST SUFFERED

Prerequisite to understanding *what* Christ suffered during His final hours is an understanding of *why* such a sacrifice was required. While these foundational truths are intimated in the Bible, from the pages of the Book of Mormon comes the Lord's clearest explanation of two laws on which hang the Atonement and ultimately our salvation.

The Law of Justice. Somewhere near your home is a courthouse. It may not be the Supreme Court building, but it likely houses a metaphor, a symbol of a principle so vital that the entire universe is governed by it and the atoning sacrifice of the Savior is wrought in response to it. Generally, it takes the form of a statue or painting of a woman. She is blindfolded and holds in her hands a set of scales. As we approach, we might see her name on her base. She is called Justice. The law or principle she represents is held by Heavenly Father in perfection and is of such great import that if He were to go contrary to it, He "would cease to be God" (Alma 42:13). Her blindfold suggests that justice must be impartially applied. The scales insinuate that justice weighs or judges everything and that even the slightest error must be balanced or corrected.

Indeed, as stated simply by the prophet Alma, "The Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance" (Alma 45:16). He cannot excuse it, ignore it, or sweep it under the rug. Every time the scales tip, perfect justice requires they be balanced, the wrong righted.

Therefore, to help us avoid the sins that would destroy our divine potential, God establishes laws (see Alma 42:22) or, more accurately, points out eternal laws which have always existed. These laws define the path we must follow to progress and become like Him and are what we commonly call the gospel, or the commandments. However, it is not enough simply to have a law, but consequences must of necessity be attached to those laws, for as Alma further enlightened us: "How could there be a law save there was a punishment?" (Alma 42:17). My oldest boy has a routine question he asks my wife and me every time a new law is laid down in our

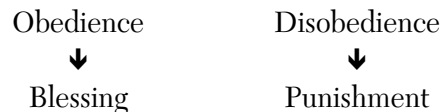
home. The scenario generally sounds something like this: “John, don’t ever cover the baby in Vaseline again.” To which he innocently but matter-of-factly asks, “What will you do to me if I do it again?” Clearly, laws must have consequences attached or the law is of no use.¹

Additionally, beyond merely attaching consequences, the divine attribute of justice requires that for every violation to a law of God, the punishment must be *enforced*. *Every* violation, *every* time. For “justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God” (Alma 42:22).

The uplifting corollary to the punishment affixed to each law is that justice demands that for every act of obedience to God’s law there is a blessing attached. The Prophet Joseph Smith instructed: “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:20–22; see also 132:5).

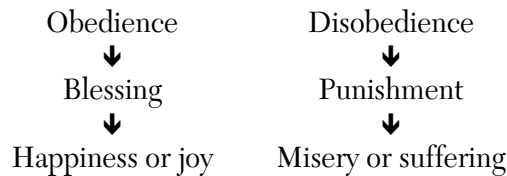
Lehi offered insight into the punishment and blessing affixed when he spoke of “the *ends* of the law” (2 Nephi 2:7; emphasis added). If we picture the law as a path we may take, then Lehi’s statement begins to come to life. I can obey the law and get one end of the path, or I can disobey and get the other end. But what are those ends? Lehi answered that question just a few verses later when he spoke of “the ends of the law which the Holy One hath given, unto the inflicting of the punishment which is affixed, which punishment that is affixed is in opposition to that of the happiness which is affixed, to answer the ends of the atonement” (2 Nephi 2:10). Therefore, Lehi says, if I disobey the law, I will receive a punishment. In addition, if I obey the law, I will receive the opposite, which would be a blessing.

The Law of Justice



He names that blessing as happiness, and in an earlier verse identifies the punishment by saying: “By the spiritual law they perish from that which is good, and become *miserable* forever” (2 Nephi 2:5; emphasis added). Alma the Younger added his witness to Lehi when he spoke to his wayward son Corianton “concerning the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner,” indicating that Corianton tried “to suppose that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery” (Alma 42:1).

The Law of Justice



It is that straightforward. Obedience leads to happiness, or as it is more commonly used in the scriptures, joy. Disobedience leads to misery, or suffering. There are *no* exceptions (see Helaman 13:38). The scales of justice must be perfectly and unequivocally balanced.

The haunting reality that arises from this knowledge is that every one of us has sinned and therefore merits the punishment of the law. Lehi did not hesitate to point out our crisis when he said, “Men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil. And the law is given unto men. And by the law no flesh is justified; or, by the law men are cut off” (2 Nephi 2:5; see also Alma 42:11–12). On one hand, God’s purpose of bringing about the eternal life of man (see Moses 1:39) cannot occur without the law and its attendant consequences. He must enforce the punishment or He would cease to be God, and we would continue in sin, never becoming like Him. On the other hand, every one of us has sinned and hence merits the punishment of the law. Justice *must* be satisfied—a supreme crisis indeed!

The Law of Mercy. William Shakespeare summed up our plight when he penned the line, “In the course of justice [only] none of us should see salvation.”² Fortunately, while being perfectly just, God holds another attribute in perfection: mercy. Yet because being

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merciful implies being willing to forgive our shortcomings and remove the resultant punishment that justice demands, these two eternal standards appear to be at odds with one another. Justice demands full payment; mercy insists on complete forgiveness. Both laws, it seems, cannot be fully exercised. “Do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice?” asked Alma. “I say unto you, Nay; not one whit. If so, God would cease to be God” (Alma 42:25). Either justice must inflict the punishment and balance the scales at the expense of mercy, or mercy must be extended, leaving justice unpaid.

Fortunately, our plight was known from the very beginning, and a way was prepared from the foundation of the earth that would satisfy the demands of justice and yet allow mercy to be fully offered. There is one way both laws can be complied with, but it requires a third party. The law of mercy is beautifully simple: someone else can step in and take the place of the guilty party. He can pay the penalty that justice demands by proxy, on two conditions: He must be *willing*, and He must be *able*. In Christ, the Book of Mormon testifies, we find both. “Therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world,” Alma explained, “to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” (Alma 42:15; see also 34:16; 2 Nephi 2:6–7).

With that clearly understood, we are ready to enter the atoning period with perception. All I need to know if I want to discover what the Savior suffered on my behalf is this: *What is the misery or suffering that justice demands of the sinner?* For through the law of mercy, He offered to take that punishment in the place of the sinner. In the words of Paul, “He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21). He suffered whatever type of misery or suffering that the law of justice demands a sinner should experience. Abinadi described Him as “standing betwixt them (the sinner) and justice; having broken the bands of death, taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions, having redeemed them, and *satisfied the demands of justice*” (Mosiah 15:9; emphasis added).

Thus, while mercy cannot rob justice, it can satisfy the demands

of justice—which, according to President Marion G. Romney, is exactly what happened in Gethsemane and the next morning on the cross: “Jesus endured the suffering required to satisfy the demands of justice, thereby making it possible for men, through faith and repentance, to be cleansed from their sins.”³

Naturally, we rejoice as the plan is unfolded to our view and the certainty of our deliverance from the grasp of justice is fathomed. Too often in our exuberance, however, we forget that mercy cannot rob justice—that simply because *we* have been spared having to pay the penalty does not mean it goes unpaid. Lehi, in blessing his son Jacob, makes a statement that many misunderstand. He said that “the way is prepared from the fall of man, and *salvation is free*” (2 Nephi 2:4; emphasis added)—free for us, perhaps, for the things that the Savior requires of us to access His atoning gift do seem minuscule when compared to the cost that justice alone would impose upon us. Yet what may come as quite a bargain for us was recompensed every whit by someone else. Indeed, as we are about to see, the merciful gift of our cleansing has come at an incomprehensibly high price.

WHAT CHRIST SUFFERED

President Joseph Fielding Smith said of the suffering of the Savior: “I think it is understood by many that the great suffering of Jesus Christ came through the driving of nails in His hands and in His feet, and in being suspended upon a cross, until death mercifully released Him. That is not the case. As excruciating, as severe as was that punishment, . . . yet still greater was the suffering which He endured in carrying the burden of the sins of the world—my sins, and your sins, and the sins of every living creature. This suffering came before He ever got to the cross, and it caused the blood to come forth from the pores of his body, so great was that anguish of His soul, the torment of His spirit that He was called to undergo.”⁴

What, then, is the payment that justice demands of the sinner—the suffering that is so intense as to cause the Son of the Eternal Father to tremble and bleed at every pore? What could, according

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to President Smith, be of greater severity than the driving of cruel spikes through the flesh that the Christian world as a whole so readily focuses on? To find the answer, we must know what punishment justice imposes upon the *unrepentant sinner*. This is vital, for according to the Savior Himself, to discover what the unrepentant will suffer is to know what He suffered to free those who do repent. “For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; but if they would not repent they must suffer even as I” (D&C 19:16–17). The explanation of this suffering comes fourfold from the inspired pages of the Book of Mormon.

GUILT

For the first glimpse of what the Savior bore, King Benjamin explained: “Therefore if that man repenteth not, and remaineth and dieth an enemy to God, the demands of divine justice do awaken his immortal soul to a lively sense of his own guilt, which doth cause him to shrink from the presence of the Lord, and doth fill his breast with guilt, and pain, and anguish, which is like an unquenchable fire, whose flame ascendeth forever and ever” (Mosiah 2:38). There is clearly a type of suffering mentioned here that is misery indeed: guilt. Alma referred to it a little differently but captured the same meaning when he said, “Now, there was a punishment affixed, and a just law given, which brought a *remorse of conscience* unto man” (Alma 42:18; emphasis added). Now, I think we want to be very careful as we word this. To say that the Savior suffered guilt makes it sound as if perhaps He were sinful. This is not the case. In fact, what the Savior suffered was *our* guilt. At first glimpse, this suffering may not sound as extreme as the brutality of the Crucifixion. However, as we reflect upon the times in our lives when we have experienced guilt, the magnitude of Gethsemane begins to unfold.

As a boy of twelve, I was baby-sitting for our neighbors who had three girls, including a two-year-old. On this blistering summer day, the parents were gone for a few hours, and we had a marvelous time in their absence, eating popsicles and playing in the backyard

sprinklers. Soon the girls' father arrived home and was greeted by the excited squeals of his two oldest daughters, who ran to meet him. After a moment of romping with the older girls, he asked me where the two-year-old was. I replied that she was in the house. Just as I said it, though, it hit me that I hadn't seen her for nearly half an hour. We entered the house and called for her repeatedly, but she didn't come. Searching the house turned up no sign of her, and I remember hoping that she had heard the commotion and had slipped out front to look for her dad. But after thoroughly exploring both the front and back yard as well as the neighbors' yards, the gravity of the situation began to settle in on us. The next moments are still clear in my mind as a panicky father turned to me and said, "I left you in charge of my little girl—Where is she?!" As the soft reply "I don't know" came from my lips, the guilt literally sickened me. He instructed me to remain with the girls while he went in the car to look for her. He was gone for an eternity—twenty minutes.

I have had a few instances of physical suffering in my life. I have been so sick with the flu that I couldn't arise from my bed. I have experienced burns, broken bones, electric shock, and even the pain of having two of my fingers severed by the blades of a lawn mower that I was brilliantly working on with the engine still running. Each of these events was painful. All were barely tolerable, and none of them would I ever choose to repeat. Nevertheless, while I sat there that day waiting for his return, with a thousand thoughts running through my head of where she might be or what might have happened to her, I would have traded all of those things in an instant for the anguish I was feeling. Even as he returned and assured me of his forgiveness, having found her wandering happily down the street several blocks away, the pain didn't leave. I had acted irresponsibly, and I knew it. No degree of reassurance could ease the turmoil I was feeling.

Guilt is emotional. It is mental. It is spiritual. It is physical. We have all felt the sickening ache in the bottom of our stomach combined with the all-encompassing mental torment that wreaks havoc upon our emotions and our ability to think of anything else. Let us suppose that in the premortal council, we were told that we would

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have to experience suffering while on earth. We could choose to suffer either as Job, with the boils and the worms and such, or to suffer as David, who in the face of all he knew of God, committed adultery and murder. I would guess most of us could make that choice immediately. Give me Job any day! Bring on the boils. Why? Because there is no pain, no misery, no agony worse than pure, unrationalizable guilt.

The prophet Alma gave a potent description of this while speaking to his son Helaman about his sinful rebellion as a youth. Recounting the bitter feelings of guilt that came upon him, he explained: “I was racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sins. Yea, I did remember all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell; yea, I saw that I had rebelled against my God, and that I had not kept his holy commandments. Yea, I had murdered many of his children, or rather led them away unto destruction; yea, and in so fine so great had been my iniquities, that the very thought of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror” (Alma 36:12–14). Notice that to help express his suffering to his son, Alma compared what he was feeling to being “racked” and “harrowed.” A rack is an ancient torture device in which the prisoner is tied hand and foot and then slowly stretched as the ropes are tightened. One would be left with the pains of being slowly ripped apart, a very vivid depiction of guilt. Those who have worked on a farm are aware that a harrow is a heavy frame with several spikes that is dragged by a horse or tractor through the soil to break it up. Alma then, describes his pain as if he, not the dirt, were the one being torn up by those heavy spikes—not a very pleasant description.

Considering that this is merely *one man's* guilt, the suffering of the Savior becomes unfathomable, yet paradoxically we can understand what He went through to the degree in which we have suffered guilt in our lives. “I believe,” said Elder J. Richard Clarke, “to use an insurance phrase, we must pay the deductible. We must experience sorrow enough, suffering enough, guilt enough so we are conscious and appreciative of the heavier burden borne by the

Savior.”⁵ Two very poignant truths arise here. First, that we can, to a very small degree, actually relate to His suffering. Second, that any suffering for sin we experience in this life is minuscule compared to His and does not satisfy the demands of justice. It only “pays the deductible.” If not for Christ, the pains of guilt that we would ultimately suffer throughout eternity would be infinitely greater than can be experienced in mortality. “Throughout the repentance process we have feelings of regret, remorse, and guilt, which cause us to suffer,” taught Elder Ronald E. Poelman. “However, our individual suffering does not satisfy the demands of justice which follow disobedience to divine law. We cannot pay the price for our sins.”⁶

If this were the only consequence that justice demands of the sinner, it would be towering indeed. However, according to the prophet Alma, there are yet other demands beyond the burden of guilt.

CUT OFF FROM THE PRESENCE OF GOD

“Therefore God gave unto [men] commandments,” Alma taught, “after having made known unto them the plan of redemption, that they should not do evil, the penalty thereof being *a second [or spiritual] death*” (Alma 12:32; emphasis added). The second penalty that justice demands of the sinner, then, is that of being cut off from the presence of God, often termed spiritual death. Speaking of this point, Elder Richard G. Scott said, “I testify that except for the Atonement of the Holy Redeemer, the demands of justice would prevent every soul born on earth from returning to the presence of God, to partake of His glory and exaltation, for all make mistakes for which we cannot personally appease justice.”⁷

Due to Adam’s violation of the law in Eden, we have all inherited this decree in some measure as we are here in mortality and cut off from the presence of the Father. “And thus we see,” Alma explained, “that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice; yea, the justice of God, which consigned them forever to be *cut off from his presence*” (Alma 42:14; emphasis added). Beyond

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Adam's transgression, all of us have sinned on our own. Thus, the penalty of being cut off from the Father would be a permanent condition in the eternities and is manifest to us in part on earth as we are cut off from the Holy Ghost when we sin (see Mosiah 2:36). As we repent, we can regain access to God's influence through the Holy Ghost.

That the Savior experienced the suffering incumbent with this penalty as He took our place upon the scales of justice is shown only once in the Bible, but it speaks volumes: "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Which one of us can imagine the extent of anguish that would provoke such a cry from the Savior? He had successfully endured the scourging and the crown of thorns with no recorded outcry. The nails had already been driven through the flesh of His wrists and feet. He had been subjected to inhumane cruelty and mocking by those who were His own. Through it all, He had maintained both composure, and as best as we can tell from the biblical account, near silence. But this was something more—an aloneness and utter spiritual void that goes beyond physical suffering and which Christ had never experienced until He stood proxy for us. Said Elder James E. Talmage of that cry: "It seems, that in addition to the fearful suffering incident to crucifixion, the agony of Gethsemane had recurred, intensified beyond human power to endure. In that bitterest hour the dying Christ was alone, alone in most terrible reality. That the supreme sacrifice of the Son might be consummated in all its fulness, the Father seems to have withdrawn the support of His immediate Presence."⁸

Elder Neal A. Maxwell added: "In a messianic psalm David spoke about Jesus' heartbreaking circumstances, including His being totally alone in the awful process! 'Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none . . . (Psalm 69:20). Jesus always deserved and always had the Father's full approval. But when He took our sins upon Him, of divine necessity

required by justice He experienced instead ‘the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God’ (D&C 76:107).”⁹

That being cut off from the Father brought great pain upon the Savior is evidenced in His own words in a revelation given to Joseph Smith and Martin Harris, reminding them of a particularly painful time in their own lives: “I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; but if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink” (D&C 19:16–18). Then, after expounding to us the depth of His suffering, He tells us a little of what caused such “exquisite” torment (D&C 19:15): “Wherefore, I command you again to repent . . . lest you suffer these punishments of which I have spoken, of which *in the smallest, yea, even in the least degree you have tasted at the time I withdrew my Spirit*” (D&C 19:20; emphasis added).

According to the Savior, Joseph Smith and Martin Harris, to whom this revelation was given, experienced the “least degree” of what He suffered during the time the Lord’s Spirit was withdrawn from them. The Lord is referring directly here to the incident in which the 116 pages of manuscript from the Book of Mormon were stolen and for a time the channels between them and the Lord were cut off.¹⁰ A description of this time in the Prophet’s life is particularly enlightening, since the Lord Himself compared it to His own suffering.

Joseph’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith, says of the occasion: “I well remember that day of darkness, both within and without. To us, at least, the heavens seemed clothed with blackness, and the earth shrouded with gloom. I have often said within myself, that if a continual punishment, as severe as that which we experienced on that occasion, were to be inflicted upon the most wicked characters who ever stood upon the footstool of the Almighty—if even their punishment were no greater than that, I should feel to pity their condition.”¹¹ That, according to the Savior, is the *smallest, even the least*

degree, of what He carried for you and for me. And we have as yet explored only half of the penalty which justice requires be met.

SUBJECT TO THE BUFFETINGS OF SATAN

In addition to the suffering of guilt and being cut off from the presence of the Lord, a third demand of justice is spoken of in the Book of Mormon. It is clear, it is repeated, and it would obviously be the fate of all who violate the law, yet the depth or particulars are mercifully beyond our imagination as to meaning or details. “Prepare your souls for that glorious day when justice shall be administered,” says the prophet Jacob, “that ye may not remember your awful guilt in perfectness, and be constrained to exclaim: . . . I know my guilt; I transgressed thy law, and my transgressions are mine; and *the devil hath obtained me, that I am a prey to his awful misery*” (2 Nephi 9:46; emphasis added). In some way inexplicable to us, those who violate the law become prey to Satan and subject to his buffetings. We know this is the case as far as the sons of perdition are concerned. But with a Book of Mormon view of the law of justice, we realize that save the law of mercy and its attendant atonement, *we are all cast out as sons of perdition!* “For behold,” said Amulek, “if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, [*or if there were no power of repentance!*] behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked” (Alma 34:35; see also 2 Nephi 9:9). It is unimaginable that in addition to bearing the load of guilt for all the world, and doing so alone, without the presence of the Father, in some way unknown to us, He was subjected to the cruelty of Satan while meeting justice’s demands for us.

What He suffered to meet this demand is not even speculated. That He did so is said best by President Boyd K. Packer: “He, by choice, accepted the penalty for all mankind for the sum total of all wickedness and depravity. . . . In choosing, He faced the awesome power of the evil one who was not confined to flesh nor subject to

mortal pain. That was Gethsemane!”¹² Elder James E. Talmage adds: “In that hour of anguish Christ met and overcame all the horrors that Satan, ‘the prince of this world’ could inflict. The frightful struggle incident to the temptations immediately following the Lord’s baptism was surpassed and overshadowed by this supreme contest with the powers of evil.”¹³

What is meant by facing Satan’s “awesome power” and “all of the horrors which he could inflict” is beyond comprehension. We do know that he had not power to infuse sin or actual evil into the Savior, for Christ said as much before He entered the garden: “Hereafter I will not talk much with you: for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me” (John 14:30). We also know that Satan hates no soul ever born upon this sphere more than Jesus, and whatever “the very jaws of hell” which gaped open wide after Christ refers to (see D&C 122:7–8), he would not spare Jesus nor hold back his rage from Him in the least degree in the realm in which he was allowed.

Christ, then, bore the combined weight of guilt for the sum of all human sin, suffered the pain incident to spiritual death as He was cut off from the Spirit and the Father, and in such a state was subject to the vilest of tortures as the powers of the evil one were unleashed upon Him. Imagine what would happen to you or me if we tried to endure such a load. When Alma the Younger bore just the agony from his own sins, the experience resulted in three days of unconsciousness and oblivion. Multiply that by you and me and by each of Heavenly Father’s children, and we begin to grasp the significance of King Benjamin’s prophecy of that fateful night: “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*; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and abominations of his people” (Mosiah 3:7; emphasis added). Were you or I to have experienced such a torment, we surely would have died. There simply comes a point when the human organism can suffer no longer, when the mind relinquishes consciousness and the body simply shuts off from sheer

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pain. How was it that the Savior walked out of Gethsemane's gate alive?

The answer lies in His miraculous birth. Born the son of Mary and the Only Begotten of the Father in the flesh, He inherited traits from each which gave Him the ability to fulfill His promise made to us in the premortal council. From His mortal mother, He inherited the ability to suffer pain. From His immortal Father, He inherited the ability to suffer an infinite amount of pain and not die. Through Mary He received the capacity to suffer death, but being the literal Son of God, He could choose at what moment, if at all, that death would take place. "For as the Father hath life in himself," said Jesus, "so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:26). On another occasion, He added: "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (John 10:17-18).

Therefore, while death would have been a merciful relief and the thought of it sweet beyond our understanding to His mind, He *chose* to remain in misery, to continue with the tortuous experience. One cannot help but ask why. Yet even as we ask, deep down we know the answer, and it humbles us to the very core. He was not finished yet. When His mind convulsed in pain and every fiber of His body yearned for death, He *chose* to continue living, to continue suffering because the full ransom had not yet been exacted, the scales of justice were not balanced. Perhaps my sins still hung in the balance, perhaps yours. And He would not shrink or allow the deliverance of death until He had drained the bitter cup to the very dregs.

The prophet Isaiah and later the condemned Abinadi gave us a very personal glimpse into that decision, telling us that when Christ would "make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed" (Isaiah 53:10; compare also Mosiah 15:10). Abinadi told us that His "seed" are the righteous who exercise faith in the prophets and in Christ's redeeming power (see Mosiah 15:11). Can you envision the Savior in His greatest time of distress, when His spoken fear is that He might shrink from the bitter cup that brims before Him, being allowed to see those who would be ransomed by His suffering? "In

the garden and on the cross,” said Elder Merrill J. Bateman, “Jesus saw each of us and not only bore our sins, but also experienced our deepest feelings so that he would know how to comfort and strengthen us.”¹⁴ Surely in His capacity as a God, in a way impossible for mortal minds to conceive, He was able to fathom you and me as He bore our sins. And that gave Him the strength to endure that which could not be endured, to continue living that He might continue suffering until the full debt was satisfied for each of us. Then, and only then, would He allow himself to succumb to the merciful release of death, which brings us to our fourth and final demand of justice.

PHYSICAL DEATH

The final demand of justice is unique. It is so because this penalty would come upon all mankind, not because of our own sins but from Adam’s violation of the law given him in Eden. Jacob explained that if not for the Atonement “the first judgment which came upon man must needs have remained to an endless duration. And if so, this flesh must have laid down to rot and to crumble to its mother earth, to rise no more” (2 Nephi 9:7). Thus, the penalty of death was pronounced for the law given in Eden. “Those scriptural words, ‘Thou mayest choose for thyself,’” said President Packer, “introduced Adam and Eve and their posterity to all the risks of mortality. In mortality men are free to choose, and each choice begets a consequence. The choice Adam made energized the law of justice, which required that the penalty for disobedience would be death.”¹⁵ President Joseph F. Smith added his witness that the Savior’s death served proxy for our own eternal physical death and satisfied justice for Adam’s violation: “For death was the penalty of the law transgressed, which man was powerless to avert, that [mandate] of God being, ‘In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die,’ and this penalty was to follow upon all flesh, all being as helpless and dependent as he was in this matter. Their only hope of redemption from the grave and the power of death was in the Savior whom God had promised, who should suffer death, . . . thereby

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opening the way for all who should follow him in the regeneration, to come forth to life again, redeemed from the penalty of the law.”¹⁶

Thus, the voluntary suffering of death by the Savior satisfied the demands of justice for Adam’s transgression. Since we are not responsible for the consequences of the law Adam violated, the payment for this demand comes unconditionally to us all.

Crucifixion was beyond doubt one of the most cruel and lingering forms of death by torture. For the Roman centurions, trained by decades of experience, the process had become a science. The large spikes driven through carefully chosen locations in the flesh, crushed and severed both nerves and tendons but inflicted no fatal wound. While the victim’s blood would certainly be spilt, it would not be enough to result in death. Instead, the unnatural posture of the body made breathing extremely difficult, forcing one to strain upwards on the nails of the feet to draw air. As inflammation, muscular spasms, and throbbing pain made this increasingly difficult, death by slow suffocation or sheer exhaustion was not uncommon. Often the crucified lived in escalating torment for long hours and occasionally for days before succumbing.

As horrid as such a death obviously was, the Savior never focuses upon the misery of His crucifixion. Truth be told, it was not the greatest weight He bore. Far greater than the searing distress of the long crucifixion process was the agony of body and spirit we have already discussed and through which He had already passed. Would, then, the crucifixion be easy for Him—something which by comparison to the previous night would be a mere formality?

On the contrary. While enduring the atrocities of the cross, it appears “if we interpret the holy word aright,” said Elder Bruce R. McConkie, “that all of the anguish, all of the sorrow, and all of the suffering of Gethsemane recurred during the final three hours on the cross.”¹⁷ Is it any wonder that darkness blackened the globe for those three hours and even nature itself trembled as its God and Creator writhed in a physical, spiritual, and mental torment of crucifixion’s pain, overflowing with Gethsemane’s anguish of soul?

After lingering until the uttermost farthing of our debt had been

settled, the words “I thirst” fell from His parched lips. A soldier quickly rushed and filled a sponge with vinegar mingled with gall, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth. Many have said this was an act of compassion as the vinegar and gall acted as an analgesic, numbing the person to the pain. Others suspect this was a further, pitiful blow in a day of torture and ridicule. Whatever the soldier’s purpose, it is the symbolism of it all that is not lost on us. How ironic that the last taste upon the lips of Him who had drained the bitter cup to the last drop was bitterness.

Having taken the vinegar and realizing that the offering was fully sufficient, He cried to the Father, “It is finished!” “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (John 19:30; Luke 23:46). Having done so, He bowed His head and voluntarily gave up His life.

“The debt is paid,” said President John Taylor, “the redemption made, the covenant fulfilled, justice satisfied.”¹⁸ “It is finished; it is finished! The Lamb of God hath overcome and trodden the wine-press alone, even the wine-press of the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God” (D&C 88:106).

The scales are balanced.

EXTRA SUFFERING NOT REQUIRED BY JUSTICE

The Savior, then, suffered through the cumulative load of guilt, being cut off from the presence of the Lord and His Spirit, the buffetings of Satan, and ultimately death. He suffered until the demands of justice were satisfied, even though it was beyond human capacity to endure. An additional truth offered only in the Book of Mormon is that Christ voluntarily accepted suffering beyond what was necessary to meet the demands of justice. Alma enlightens us that He also took upon him the pains, sickness, and infirmities of His people, “that He may know *according to the flesh* how to succor His people” (see Alma 7:11–12; emphasis added). This added burden allows Him to be a Savior with power to strengthen as well as to save. Having experienced the pains caused by sin as well as those that stem from mortality’s hardships, He stands prepared to comfort us with comprehension and compassion.

CONCLUSION

“Our salvation depends on believing in and accepting the Atonement,” declared President James E. Faust. “Such acceptance requires a continual effort to understand it more fully. . . . Any increase in our understanding of His atoning sacrifice draws us closer to Him.”¹⁹

Is it any wonder that a man will get nearer to God by abiding by the precepts of the Book of Mormon than by any other book? (see the Introduction to the Book of Mormon). Left to the Bible alone, the plain and precious doctrines of Christ’s supernal offering would be beyond the reach of our understanding. Yet from the Book of Mormon flow the foundational teachings which illuminate both the purpose and the price of the most important event in the history or destiny of man. With the poet Eliza R. Snow, we declare: “How great, how glorious, how complete / Redemption’s grand design / Where justice, love, and mercy meet / In harmony divine!”²⁰

NOTES

1. This truth could be quickly proven in our own society by retaining speed limits but removing every penalty for driving faster than the limits! Immediately speed limit signs would hold their greatest value in their ability to break up the view of sagebrush from the car window.

2. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 4, scene 1, lines 199–200.

3. Marion G. Romney, “Repentance,” *Ensign*, November 1980, 47.

4. Joseph Fielding Smith, in Conference Report, April 1944, 49–50.

5. J. Richard Clarke, “The Lord of Life,” *Ensign*, May 1993, 10.

6. Ronald E. Poelman, “Divine Forgiveness,” *Ensign*, November 1993, 85.

7. Richard G. Scott, “Jesus Christ, Our Redeemer,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 53.

8. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1962), 661.

9. Neal A. Maxwell, *Lord, Increase Our Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), 13.

10. For a full account of the story, see Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. 2d ed. rev. Edited by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932–51), 1:20–23.

11. Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, edited by Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 132.
12. Boyd K. Packer, "Atonement, Agency, Accountability," *Ensign*, May 1988, 69.
13. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 613.
14. Merrill J. Bateman, "The Power to Heal from Within," *Ensign*, May 1995, 14.
15. Packer, "Atonement, Agency, Accountability," 71.
16. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 202–3.
17. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 4:232 n.22.
18. John Taylor, *The Gospel Kingdom* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 114.
19. James E. Faust, "The Atonement: Our Greatest Hope." *Ensign*, November 2001, 18.
20. Eliza R. Snow, "How Great the Wisdom and the Love," *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 195.