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THE DOCTRINE OF MERIT

THE BOOK OF MORMON
ON THE WORK OF GRACE*Robert L. Millet*

BECAUSE THE MERITS AND MERCY of God are so central to an understanding and appreciation of the Atonement as taught in the Book of Mormon, I have chosen to focus on them at some length. I am persuaded that to ignore or to misunderstand this dimension of the Master's plan of redemption has both doctrinal and practical implications—it affects what we teach and believe, as well as how we approach life. This is a discussion about grace. It is also a discussion about works. It is in fact a discussion about how grace works, about the goodness and condescension of a benevolent God, and about the good works that flow from the heart of a man or woman who has truly been changed by the merits and mercies of Christ.

LOST AND FALLEN

In a revelation given to Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon is described as “a record of a fallen people” (D&C 20:9). It is certainly

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a narrative history of the rise and fall of two great civilizations, a sobering chronicle of how pride and secret combinations usher nations into destruction. It is also an ever-present reminder that without divine assistance and the regenerating powers of the atonement of Christ, men and women remain forevermore lost and fallen creatures.¹ The plight and the promise, the malady and the medication, the Fall and the Atonement—this is the overriding and undergirding message of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon is redemptive theology at its best.

The Latter-day Saint view of the Fall is remarkably optimistic. We believe that Adam and Eve went into the Garden of Eden to fall and that their fall was as much a part of the foreordained plan of the Father as was the very Atonement. We believe in the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith, that “Adam was made to open the way of the world,”² that the Fall was a move downward but forward in the eternal scheme of things, and that it “brought man into the world and set his feet upon progression’s highway.”³ We do not believe that men and women are, by virtue of the Fall, depraved creatures. We do not believe that men and women are so inclined to evil that they do not even have the capacity to choose good on their own. We do not believe, with much of the Christian world, that because of the Fall little children are subject to an “original sin.” “When our spirits took possession of these tabernacles,” President Brigham Young observed, “they were as pure as the angels of God, wherefore total depravity cannot be a true doctrine.”⁴

There was, however, a fall, and it does have universal consequences. President Ezra Taft Benson observed: “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.”⁵ The Fall and the Atonement are a package deal; one brings the other into existence, and I am not aware of any discussion of the Atonement in the Book of Mormon that is not accompanied, either directly or by implication, with a discussion of the Fall. We do not appreciate and treasure the medicine until we appreciate the

seriousness of the malady. One cannot look earnestly and longingly to the Redeemer if he or she does not sense the need for redemption. Jesus came to earth to do more than offer sage advice. He is not merely a benevolent consultant, a spiritual adviser. He came to save us.

In what seems to be the very first reference in the Book of Mormon to the Fall, Nephi taught that “six hundred years from the time that my father left Jerusalem, a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews—even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world. And he also spake concerning the prophets, how great a number had testified of these things, concerning this Messiah, of whom he had spoken, or this Redeemer of the world. Wherefore, all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer” (1 Nephi 10:4–6; compare Alma 42:6). I am fascinated with the two words so descriptive of mortals—*lost* and *fallen*. Truly, as Isaiah declared (and as Abinadi quoted), “All we, like sheep, have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way” (Mosiah 14:6; compare Isaiah 53:6). The Good Shepherd thus comes on a search and rescue mission for all of His lost sheep. He who never took a moral detour or a backward step thus reaches out and reaches down to lift us up. We are lost in the sense that we do not know our way home without a guide, in the sense that we are alienated from God and separated from things of righteousness. We are fallen in the sense that we have chosen, like our Exemplar, to condescend and enter a telestial tenement; in the sense that our eternal spirit has taken up its temporary abode in a tabernacle of clay; in the sense that we must be lifted up, quickened, and resuscitated spiritually if we are to return to the divine presence.

To say that we do not inherit original sin through the Fall is not to say that we do not inherit a fallen nature and thus the capacity to sin. Fallenness and mortality are inherited; they come through conception (see Moses 6:55). They come to us as a natural consequence of the second estate we call earth life. Lehi explained to Jacob that following the Fall, God “*showed unto all men that they were lost, because of the transgression of their parents*” (2 Nephi

2:21; emphasis added; compare Mosiah 16:3–5). In a similar vein, the brother of Jared called upon Jehovah to touch the sixteen stones and prayed: “O Lord, thou hast said that we must be encompassed about by the floods. Now behold, O Lord, and do not be angry with thy servant because of his weakness before thee; for we know that thou art holy and dwellest in the heavens, and that *we are unworthy before thee; because of the fall our natures have become evil continually*” (Ether 3:2; emphasis added).

Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote: “Adam fell. . . . In this state all men sin. All are lost. All are fallen. All are cut off from the presence of God. All have become carnal, sensual, and devilish by nature. Such a way of life is inherent in this mortal existence.”⁶ Similarly, President Brigham Young noted that a critical and doubting disposition concerning the work of the Lord “arises from the power of evil that is so prevalent upon the face of the whole earth. It was given to you by your father and mother; it was mingled with your conception in the womb, and it has ripened in your flesh, in your blood, and in your bones, so that it has become riveted in your very nature.”⁷ On another occasion he explained: “There are no persons without evil passions to embitter their lives. Mankind are revengeful, passionate, hateful, and devilish in their dispositions. This we inherit through the fall, and the grace of God is designed to enable us to overcome it.”⁸

We can grow in spiritual graces to the point wherein we have no more disposition to do evil but to do good continually (see Mosiah 5:2) and wherein we cannot look upon sin save it be with abhorrence (see Alma 13:12; see also 2 Nephi 9:49; Jacob 2:5). We can, like Nephi, delight in the things of the Lord (see 2 Nephi 4:16). But as long as we dwell in the flesh, we will be subject to the pulls of a fallen world. “Will sin be perfectly destroyed?” President Brigham Young asked. “No, it will not, for it is not so designed in the economy of heaven. . . . Do not suppose that we shall ever in the flesh be free from temptations to sin. Some suppose that they can in the flesh be sanctified body and spirit and become so pure that they will never again feel the effects of the power of the adversary of truth. Were it possible for a person to attain to this degree of perfection in the

flesh, he could not die neither remain in a world where sin predominates. . . . I think we shall more or less feel the effects of sin so long as we live, and finally have to pass the ordeals of death.”⁹

An angel explained to King Benjamin that “men drink damnation to their own souls except they humble themselves and become as little children, and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent. For 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” (Mosiah 3:18–19). The natural man is an enemy to God in that he (or she) is operating on another agenda than God’s, is doing everything in his or her power to bring to pass their own whims and wishes, and in general has placed his or her will above that of the Captain of our souls. President Brigham Young taught that “the natural man is at enmity with God. That fallen nature in every one is naturally opposed, inherently, through the fall, to God and to His Kingdom, and wants nothing to do with them.”¹⁰ Such persons are thereby operating at cross-purposes to the Father’s plan for the salvation and redemption of His children and thus prove to be their own worst enemy. “All men that are in a state of nature,” Alma observed, “or I would say, 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 42:11).

OUR ONLY HOPE: HIS MERITS

Our hope and trust cannot be in ourselves, no matter how impressive our credentials or how stunning our achievements. We are mortal, and our imperfections and limitations are only too obvious. Nor must our trust or our hope be in man-made programs, procedures, lists, formulas, or laws of spiritual success. As my friend Sheri Dew, former counselor in the Relief Society general presidency, pointed out, “The Savior isn’t our last chance; He is our only

chance. Our only chance to overcome self-doubt and catch a vision of who we may become. Our only chance to repent and have our sins washed clean. Our only chance to purify our hearts, subdue our weaknesses, and avoid the adversary. Our only chance to obtain redemption and exaltation. Our only chance to find peace and happiness in this life and eternal life in the world to come. . . .

“The Lord knows the way,” Sister Dew continued, “because He *is* the way and is our only chance for successfully negotiating mortality. His Atonement makes available all of the power, peace, light, and strength that we need to deal with life’s challenges—those ranging from our own mistakes and sins to trials over which we have no control but we still feel pain.”¹¹

We come unto Christ not alone to be taught but to be transformed. He is not only our Example but also our Change Agent and our Benefactor. Jesus is not only a convenient resource; He is the vital and indispensable element in our quest for happiness here and eternal reward hereafter. There is no hope and no possibility of reconciliation with the Father except through the Savior. The Atonement is that divine act of mercy and grace and condescension by which our Father and God opens the door to reunion. In and through Adam, we partake of mortality and death. In and through Christ our Mediator and Intercessor, we partake of immortality and the abundant life. By means of the Atonement, the finite is reconciled to the Infinite, the incomplete to the Complete, the unfinished to the Finished, the imperfect to the Perfect. The Atonement, as an act of grace, demonstrates the love of the Father for His children. Jesus Christ, who lived a sinless and perfect life, claims of the Father “his rights of mercy which he hath upon the children of men” (Moroni 7:27). The Book of Mormon is a powerful invitation to come unto Christ and be changed. Indeed, one who chooses Christ chooses to be changed. The plan of salvation is not just a program bent on making bad men good and good men better, though it certainly does that; rather, it is a system of salvation that seeks to renovate society and transform the whole of humankind.

The Book of Mormon teaches that we are saved by merit, but not by our own merit. “*Since man had fallen,*” Aaron explained to

the father of Lamoni, “*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; emphasis added). This requires a bit of explanation. Of course, we are expected to receive the ordinances of salvation, work faithfully in the kingdom, perform acts of Christian service, and endure faithfully to the end. Of course, we are required to do the works of righteousness. These things are necessary—they evidence our covenant with Christ to follow Him and keep His commandments. They are *necessary*, but they are not *sufficient*.

Through the Church, we receive the ordinances of salvation. Through the Church, we sing and preach and rejoice. Through the Church, we learn to love and serve one another, to contribute to the edification and growth of the “body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12), to officiate in a system of organized sacrifice. But our hope for salvation is not in a system, not in an organization, not in a program, inspired and God-ordained though it may be. Our hope is in Christ, the Person. In a world that offers flimsy and fleeting remedies for mortal despair, Jesus comes to us in our moments of need with a “more excellent hope” (Ether 12:32). What Jesus Christ *has* done speaks volumes concerning what He *can* do and what He *will* do for us.

Peace and strength here, and salvation and eternal life hereafter, come through the merits of Christ. Lehi explained to his son Jacob: “Wherefore, I know that thou art redeemed . . .” (2 Nephi 2:3). Why was he redeemed? We know that he was faithful, just like his brother Nephi. We know that he saw the Lord, just as Nephi and Isaiah had (see 2 Nephi 11:3). But even though Jacob was an obedient man who hearkened to the words of God and His servants, that isn’t why he was redeemed. Note the full sentence: “Wherefore, I know that thou art redeemed, *because of the righteousness of thy Redeemer*” (2 Nephi 2:3; emphasis added). Odd, isn’t it? Jacob was bound for glory because of the goodness of Jesus!

Lehi went on to teach Jacob that “there is no flesh that 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). A converted *Lamanite* king exulted to his people “that [God] hath granted unto

us that we might repent of these things, and also that he hath forgiven us of those our many sins and murders which we have committed, *and taken away the guilt from our hearts, through the merits of his Son*" (Alma 24:10; emphasis added). Samuel the Lamanite likewise called upon the sinful Nephites to believe on the name of Jesus Christ: "And if ye believe on his name ye will repent of all your sins, that thereby *ye may have a remission of them through his merits*" (Helaman 14:13; emphasis added). Truly, we go into the world and preach the message of salvation to our brothers and sisters "that they may believe the gospel and *rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ*, and be glorified through faith in his name, and that through their repentance they might be saved" (D&C 3:20; emphasis added).

Faith is the complete trust, confidence in, and reliance upon the perfect merits, tender mercy, and endless grace of Jesus Christ for salvation. It is a gift of the Spirit (see Moroni 10:11), a divine endowment that affirms to the human heart the identity and redemptive mission of the Savior. It is only through exercising faith in the name of Jesus Christ—meaning His power or authority, His atoning mission and work—that salvation comes to the children of men (see Acts 4:12; 2 Nephi 9:24; Mosiah 3:17; 26:22; Alma 22:13; Helaman 14:13). In the words of Amulek, the atonement of Christ "bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance" (Alma 34:15).

Elder Orson Pratt wrote that "the grace and faith by which man is saved, are the gifts of God, having been purchased for him not by his own works, but by the blood of Christ. Had not these gifts been purchased for man, all exertions on his part would have been entirely unavailing and fruitless. Whatever course man might have pursued, he could not have atoned for one sin; it required the sacrifice of a sinless and pure Being in order to purchase the gifts of faith, repentance, and salvation for fallen man. Grace, Faith, Repentance, and Salvation, when considered in their origin, are not of man, neither by his works; man did not devise, originate, nor adopt them; superior Beings in Celestial abodes, provided these gifts, and revealed the conditions to man by which he might become a partaker of them. Therefore all boasting on the part of man is

excluded. He is saved by a plan which his works did not originate—a plan of heaven, and not of earth.”¹²

In his enlightening and inimitable style, C. S. Lewis stated: “At first it is natural for a baby to take its mother’s milk without knowing its mother. It is equally natural for us to see the man who helps us without seeing Christ behind him. But we must not remain babies. We must go on to recognise the real Giver. It is madness not to. Because, if we do not, we shall be relying on human beings. And that is going to let us down. The best of them will make mistakes; all of them will die. We must be thankful to all the people who have helped us, we must honour them and love them. But never, never pin your whole faith on any human being: not if he is the best and wisest in the whole world. There are lots of nice things you can do with sand; but do not try building a house on it.”¹³

HIS ENABLING POWER

Without trust in the Lord, without recognizing our limits and learning to lean upon the merits of Christ, we will probably either work ourselves into a frenzy of spiritual and physical exhaustion or else find ourselves doing all the right things but feeling little pleasure in doing so. So often we end up going through the motions. There is a better and higher motivation, however, one that is above and beyond self-discipline, well beyond sheer willpower and dogged determination. It is a motivation born of the Spirit, one that comes to us as a result of a change of heart. Through the atonement of Christ, we can do more than enjoy a change of behavior; we come to have our *nature* changed.

“The Lord works from the inside out,” President Benson testified. “The world works from the outside in. The world would take people out of the slums. Christ takes the slums out of people, and then they take themselves out of the slums. The world would mold men by changing their environment. Christ changes men, who then change their environment. The world would shape human behavior, but Christ can change human nature.” President Benson added: “Yes, Christ changes men, and changed men can change the

world. Men changed for Christ will be captained by Christ. . . . Finally, men captained by Christ will be consumed in Christ.”¹⁴

Consider a strange analogy. Imagine that you are standing in a baptismal font filled with water up to your waist. A person in authority walks up to the font carrying a large container. He empties the container, and you now have one hundred ping-pong balls floating in the font with you. The man speaks: “Brother Millet, I hold the keys to your salvation. I’ll make a deal with you: if you can submerge all one hundred ping-pong balls at the same time, your salvation in the highest heaven is secured.” You reflect on the task for a moment and then respond: “I’ll take the offer. Just give me a few moments.” You think to yourself: “This should be a snap! I’m capable, competent, coordinated, and in excellent physical condition. I can do it!” And you begin. You manage to submerge ten, then twenty, then thirty, using only your two hands. Then several of those balls pop up. “That’s okay,” you think. You were only using your hands anyway. You now go about the task in a serious way, using your arms and elbows and chin and legs and feet. Sixty, seventy, eighty, then pop! Out come ten formerly submerged balls. “That’s all right,” you say to yourself. “Don’t panic. I can do this. I’ve certainly handled tougher situations than this.” Over and over and over again, you attempt to do what eventually appears to be the impossible.

In a sense, my sins are like those ping-pong balls. I can go about the task of overcoming them one by one, one sin at a time. I can initiate a Benjamin Franklin approach to repentance, work on a vice (or a virtue) for a season and then move on to the next one. But, to be honest, I don’t have that much time in this life—or energy. So, also, with performing my many assignments or doing all that is expected of me: I can grit my teeth, tighten my grip on the iron rod until my knuckles go white, and hold on for dear life. I can do my job with tenacity and willpower and personal discipline. Now, to be sure, a certain amount of discipline is associated with discipleship; the Lord expects us to give Him our best shot. But I am convinced that He does not expect us to do all of this by ourselves. He has offered to help us, to strengthen us, to enable and empower us.

That's a pretty generous offer, and we would be foolish to refuse or ignore it.

The grace of God is not just that final, divine boost into celestial glory that a gracious Father and benevolent Savior provide at the time of judgment. We will, to be sure, require all the help we can get in order to be prepared to go where God and angels are, and feel comfortable there; at the same time, grace is something we have access to every hour of every day of every year. "True grace," as John MacArthur has explained, "is more than just a giant freebie, opening the door to heaven in the sweet by and by, but leaving us to wallow in sin in the bitter here and now. Grace is God presently at work in our lives."¹⁵ It is through the grace of God "that individuals, through faith in the atonement of Jesus Christ and repentance of their sins, *receive strength and assistance to do good works that they otherwise would not be able to maintain if left to their own means*. This grace is *an enabling power* that allows men and women to lay hold on eternal life and exaltation after they have expended their own best efforts."¹⁶ The Lord provides for His followers a strength, an energy, a living power. It is by this means, by this new life in Christ, that we do what we could not do on our own.

While serving as a priesthood leader many years ago, I had occasion to work with a young man who was struggling with same-sex attraction. He had violated his temple covenants but sincerely wanted to change. Church disciplinary measures were taken, and he began to work toward change. He spoke often of how difficult it was for him to be active in the Church, to attend all the activities, and in general to be a typical Latter-day Saint when he felt so very atypical. He committed to avoid inappropriate sexual activity but wrestled with his same-sex attraction. One day he asked me: "If I do the things you have asked me to do—go to Church, read the scriptures, fast and pray, plead for divine help, receive priesthood blessings when necessary, and be chaste—can you assure me that the Lord will take away these desires, these attractions? Can you promise me they will go away?" It was a tough question.

As I recall, I said something like this: "I know that the Lord can indeed change you, change your heart. I know that He can do that

instantaneously if He chooses to do so. I know that the power of change is in Jesus Christ, and that dramatic and rapid change can take place. I do not know, however, whether the Lord will change you right away. I know this: If you do what you have been asked to do, and if you do it regularly and consistently, from now on, God will change you, either here or hereafter. You may be required to deal with these feelings until the day you die. But I can promise you two things—first, these feelings will eventually be transformed; and second, if God does not choose to bring about a major change in your nature in this life, he will strengthen and empower you to deal with the temptations you will face. You don't need to face this on your own."

I shared with my young friend a few scriptures that have special meaning to me. I reminded him that the celestial kingdom is the eternal abode of those who "overcome by faith" (D&C 76:53). I then turned to the Book of Mormon and read Alma's counsel to his faithful son Helaman: "Preach unto them repentance, and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ; teach them to humble themselves and to be meek and lowly in heart; teach them to *withstand every temptation of the devil, with their faith on the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Alma 37:33; emphasis added). Truly, Christ is our Advocate, the One who knows "the weakness of man, and how to succor them who are tempted" (D&C 62:1). The devil doesn't need to get us to steal or lie or smoke or be immoral—he merely needs to suggest that we understate, undersell, and underestimate the powers, appropriateness, and relevance of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Prince of Peace was sent to "bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound" (Isaiah 61:1). The Lord Jehovah, who is Jesus Christ, is the Great Physician, the One sent of the Father to heal our wounds, to dry our tears, to settle our souls. We live in a fallen world, a world of pain and trauma and tragedy, a world where bad things do indeed happen to good people. We live in a world where our goodwill is spurned, our noble desires are questioned, our benevolent deeds are rebutted. Life hurts—a lot. Sin on our part is only one way—albeit a major way—by which we are wounded in

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mortality. Very often others' sins against us result in pain and agony of soul. Abuse in its many ugly forms takes a terrible toll on human feelings of worth. Harshness, rudeness, callousness, and insensitivity—these are but a few ways by which Satan wins a battle through man's inhumanity to man. Thus, each of us wrestles not only with sin and repentance but also with feelings of inadequacy, feelings of loneliness, bitterness, jealousy, or betrayal.

Alma explained that the Redeemer would "go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people. And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:11–12).

This scripture points us to the Messiah's power to lift us, lighten our burdens, and cradle us midst any care. It highlights the fact that Christ's empathy was made perfect through His participation in pain, our pain as well as His. Though Jehovah knew all things cognitively, there were some things He could only know experientially, some things He would be required to go through personally in order to be able to assist us, personally, in our passage through the second estate (see Alma 7:13).

I have been inspired over the years in working with those saintly persons who are seeking to recover from abuse, desertion, or betrayal. I have had reaffirmed, from witnessing their vexations of the soul, the eternal verity that mortals can do only so much in their feeble efforts to right the wrongs of this life. I have been deeply touched as I have beheld a miracle in process—their growing capacity to forgive. In our first meeting, there might have been much of bitterness and even of hatred expressed. As time passes, however, and as the Spirit of the Lord begins to work marvelous wonders in the human heart, I hear the offended one say things like: "Well, I don't hate him (or her) anymore. I don't want to be his closest friend, but I don't hate him. I can't." Then later I hear the following: "I am

still troubled by what happened, but I no longer have bitter feelings toward this person.” And then I hear: “I hope things work out for him. I deeply hope he can get his act together and straighten out. I want him to be happy.” What a stunning illustration of a rebirth of the soul! Darkness and despair are replaced by light and peace. Doubt is replaced by confidence. Rancor is replaced by tenderness and magnanimity. Such a power, the power to take away the pain, turn away the anger, and put away the past—such a power is not of this earth.

We as mortals simply do not have the power to fix everything that is broken. Complete restitution, as we know it, may not be possible. President Boyd K. Packer explained that “sometimes you *cannot* give back what you have taken because you don’t have it to give. If you have caused others to suffer unbearably—defiled someone’s virtue, for example—it is not within your power to give it back. . . .

“If you cannot undo what you have done, you are trapped. It is easy to understand how helpless and hopeless you then feel and why you might want to give up, just as Alma did.

“The thought that rescued Alma, when he acted upon it, is this: 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’ (see Matthew 5:25–26), the law of restitution is suspended. Your obligation is transferred to the Lord. He will settle your accounts.”¹⁷

This strength, this enlivening influence, this spiritual change about which we have been speaking, does not come to us just because we work harder or longer hours. It comes as a result of working smarter, working in conjunction with the Lord God Omnipotent. Elder Gene R. Cook pointed out that “if we can obtain the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, that divine enabling power to assist us, we will triumph in this life and be exalted in the life to come. . . . I bear witness that if we will seek the grace of God, He will come to our aid and the aid of our loved ones in times of

need.”¹⁸ President Brigham Young likewise testified: “My faith is, when we have done all we can, then the Lord is under obligation, and will not disappoint the faithful; He will perform the rest.”¹⁹

THE DELICATE BALANCE

Latter-day Saints have often been critical of those who stress salvation by grace alone, while we have often been criticized for a type of works-righteousness. The gospel is in fact a gospel covenant—a two-way promise. The Lord agrees to do for us what we could never do for ourselves—to forgive our sins, to lift our burdens, to renew our souls and re-create our nature, to raise us from the dead and qualify us for glory hereafter. At the same time, we promise to do what we *can* do: receive the ordinances of salvation, love and serve one another (see Mosiah 18:8–10), and do all in our power to put off the natural man and deny ourselves of ungodliness (see Mosiah 3:19; Moroni 10:32). We know, without question, that the power to save us, to change us, to renew our souls, is in Christ. True faith, however, always manifests itself in *faithfulness*. “When faith springs up in the heart,” President Brigham Young taught, “good works will follow, and good works will increase that pure faith within them.”²⁰

Latter-day Saints believe, with their Christian brothers and sisters, that salvation is a gift (see D&C 6:13; 14:7), but we also emphasize that a gift must be received (see D&C 88:33). One’s receipt of the ordinances of salvation and one’s efforts to keep the commandments are extensions and manifestations of true faith. In an effort to establish the appropriate balance, I feel that it would be a worthwhile experience to list a few of the scriptural passages that affirm the need for works and that attest that men and women will be judged by God according to their works. This is certainly a key message in the Bible (e.g., Psalm 62:11–12; Proverbs 24:12; Jeremiah 17:10; Matthew 7:21; 16:27; Acts 10:34–35; Romans 2:6, 13; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Titus 3:8; James 1:22; 2:19–20, 26; 1 Peter 1:17; 1 John 3:18; Revelation 20:12).

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been given for the purpose of “proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true” (D&C 20:11). Note the following confirmatory passages concerning the vital place of good works:

“The day should come that they must be judged of their works, yea, even the works which were done by the temporal body in their days of probation” (1 Nephi 15:32).

“Yea, they are grasped with death, and hell; and death, and hell, and the devil, and all that have been seized therewith must stand before the throne of God, and be judged according to their works” (2 Nephi 28:23).

“And now I have spoken the words which the Lord God hath commanded me. And thus saith the Lord: They shall stand as a bright testimony against this people, at the judgment day; whereof they shall be judged, every man according to his works, whether they be good, or whether they be evil” (Mosiah 3:23–24).

“Do ye exercise faith in the redemption of him who created you? Do you look forward with an eye of faith, and view this mortal body raised in immortality, and this corruption raised in incorruption, to stand before God to be judged according to the deeds which have been done in the mortal body?” (Alma 5:15; compare Mosiah 16:10).

“Therefore, prepare ye the way of the Lord, for the time is at hand that all men shall reap a reward of their works, according to that which they have been—if they have been righteous they shall reap the salvation of their souls, according to the power and deliverance of Jesus Christ; and if they have been evil they shall reap the damnation of their souls, according to the power and captivity of the devil” (Alma 9:28).

“Therefore the wicked remain as though there had been no redemption made, except it be the loosing of the bands of death; for behold, the day cometh that all shall rise from the dead and stand before God, and be judged according to their works” (Alma 11:41; see also 12:12).

“He [Jesus] shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection, that all men shall stand before him, to be

judged at the last and judgment day, according to their works” (Alma 33:22; see also 36:15).

“And it is requisite with the justice of God that men should be judged according to their works; and if their works were good in this life, and the desires of their hearts were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good” (Alma 41:3).

“Whosoever will come may come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds” (Alma 42:27).

“The great and last day, when all people, and all kindreds, and all nations and tongues shall stand before God, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil” (3 Nephi 26:4).

“And for this cause I write unto you all, that ye may know that ye must all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ, yea, every soul who belongs to the whole human family of Adam; and ye must stand to be judged of your works, whether they be good or evil” (Mormon 3:20).

So on the one hand, Latter-day Saint scripture and prophetic teachings establish the essential truth that salvation is free and that it comes by grace, through God’s unmerited favor. On the other hand, ancient and modern prophets set forth the equally vital point that works are a necessary though insufficient condition for salvation. We will be judged according to our works, not according to the merits of our works, but to the extent that our works manifest to God who and what we have *become*.

One writer offered a parable that might prove helpful in understanding a Latter-day Saint perspective on this vital matter: “A man is wandering in a hot and barren waste, and about to die of thirst, when he is caused to look up at the top of the hill where he sees a fountain of water in a restful setting of green grass and trees. His first impulse is to dismiss it as a mirage sent to torture his weary soul. But, being wracked with thirst and fatigue, and doomed to certain destruction anyway, he chooses to believe and pursue this last hope. As he drives his weary flesh to the top of the hill, he begins to

see evidence of the reality of his hope; and, renewing his efforts, struggles on to the summit where he wets his parched lips, cools his fevered brow, and restores life to his body as he drinks deeply from the fountain. He is saved!”

The author of the parable then offers these comments by way of interpretation: “What saved him? Was it the climb up the hill? Or was it the water? If he had remained at the foot of the hill either because of disbelief or lack of fortitude, his only means of salvation would have remained inaccessible. On the other hand, if he had climbed to the top and found he had labored in vain, he would have been worse off, if possible. . . .

“The climb up the hill represents obedience to the gospel (faith in Christ, repentance, baptism of water, baptism of the Spirit, and endurance to the end); the water is that same eternal drink which Jesus offered the woman at the well. It is the atonement of Christ which is supplied as an act of grace.”²¹

In reality, and as we have emphasized already, when coupled with true faith and its attendant actions the work of salvation of the human soul is a product of divine grace. C. S. Lewis explained: “Christians have often disputed as to whether what leads the Christian home is good actions, or Faith in Christ. . . . You see, we are now trying to understand, and to separate into water-tight compartments, what exactly God does and what man does when God and man are working together.”²²

What does it mean, therefore, to “work out our own salvation”? (Philippians 2:12). Certainly not to attempt to do it by ourselves, for the divine word is sure and clear—such is impossible. Certainly not to accept Christ and His gospel and then live however we choose, utterly disregarding the standards of Christian discipleship—such is an offense to God, and we will answer for the same on the day of judgment. No, it means to pray and trust in the Lord God as though everything depended upon Him, and also to work and labor as though everything depended upon Him! If I rely *wholly* upon the merits of Christ (see 2 Nephi 31:19), how much do I rely upon myself to be saved? If I rely *alone* upon the merits of Christ (see Moroni 6:4), how much do I rely upon myself to be saved? The

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answer to both questions is a resounding “NONE.” This is not a matter of self-confidence; it is a matter of confidence in Christ. I have a role in my own salvation, but peace and assurance and hope come because of what Jesus the Redeemer has done and will do to qualify me for life with Him one day. Thus, the grace of God, provided through the intercession of the Savior, is free yet expensive; it is costly grace, “costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. . . . Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son, . . . and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us.”²³

On the last page of the Book of Mormon, Moroni writes: “Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and *if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you*” (Moroni 10:32; emphasis added). For us to enjoy the strength, enabling power, and purifying influence of the mighty arm of God, we must do all in our power to receive it. Thus, we reach and stretch to take the hand of the Almighty. We open our hands and our hearts to the proffered gift. We strive with all our souls to love our Maker and avoid those unholy attitudes and behaviors and places and influences that distance us from the Holy One. Then His grace is sufficient for us.

In a word, I am incomplete or partial, while Christ is whole or complete. As I come unto Christ by covenant, we (Christ and I) are complete. I am unfinished, while Christ is finished. Through “relying alone” upon the merits of the Author and Finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2; compare Moroni 6:4), I become finished or fully formed. I am imperfect, while Christ is perfect. Together we are perfect. Those who come unto Christ become perfect *in Him* (see Moroni 10:32). Those who inherit the celestial kingdom are just men and just women who have been “*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; emphasis added).

Because we are human—because we are weak and mortal and tired—we will probably never reach the point in this life when we have done “all we can do.” Too many of us misread 2 Nephi 25:23 and conclude that the Lord can assist us only *after*, meaning following the time that, we have done “all we can do.” In fact, the Lord can and does help us all along the way. I think Nephi is trying to emphasize that no matter how much we do, it simply will not be enough to guarantee salvation without Christ’s intervention. Restating Nephi, “Above and beyond all we can do, notwithstanding all we can do, it is by the grace of Christ that we are saved.” And what is true of our ultimate salvation is true of our daily walk and talk, of our personality and our passions. Above and beyond all efforts at self-control, behavior modification, or reducing our sins to manageable categories, “everything which really needs to be done in our souls can only be done by God.”²⁴

There is yet another way to look at 2 Nephi 25:23. After the conversion of thousands of Lamanites by the sons of Mosiah, the brother of Lamoni, named Anti-Nephi-Lehi, counseled with his people, those, you remember, who had made a covenant not to take up weapons against their brethren in war. Note his words:

“And I also thank my God, yea, my great God, that he hath granted unto us that we might repent of these things, and also that he hath forgiven us of those our many sins and murders which we have committed, and taken away the guilt from our hearts, through the merits of his Son.

“And now behold, my brethren, since it has been *all that we could do*, (as we were the most lost of all mankind) *to repent of all our sins* and the many murders which we have committed, and to get God to take them away from our hearts, for *it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain—*

“Now, my best beloved brethren, since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren” (Alma 24:8–12; emphasis added).

There is a very real sense in which “all we can do” is come

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before the Lord in reverent humility, confess our weakness, and plead for His forgiveness, for His mercy and grace. It occurred to me recently that life is repentance, that progression and improvement and growth and maturity and refinement are all forms of repentance, and that the God-fearing live in a constant state of repentance.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is intended to liberate us, to lift and lighten our burdens. If it is not doing that in our personal lives, then perhaps our approach and understanding, our orientation—not necessarily the quantity of work to be done—may need some adjustment. *Balance*—that is the key. I have come to sense the need to balance a type of “divine discontent”—a healthy longing to improve—with what Nephi called a “perfect brightness of hope” (2 Nephi 31:20)—the Spirit-given assurance that in and through Jesus Christ we are going to make it.

CONCLUSION

I know of the power that is in Christ, power not only to create the worlds and divide the seas, but also to still the storms of the human heart, to right life’s wrongs, to ease and eventually even remove the pain of scarred and beaten souls. There is no bitterness, no anger, no fear, no jealousy, no feelings of inadequacy that cannot be healed by the Great Physician. He is the Balm of Gilead. He is the One sent by the Father to “bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound” (Isaiah 61:1). True followers of Christ learn to trust in Him more, and less in the arm of flesh. They learn to rely on Him more, and less on man-made solutions. They learn to surrender their burdens to Him more. They learn to work to their limits and then be willing to seek that grace or enabling power that will make up the difference—that sacred power that makes all the difference!

As Moroni has instructed us, when we come unto Christ and seek, all through our lives, to deny ourselves of ungodliness and give ourselves without hindrance to God, “then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ”—

whole, complete, fully formed—“and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God” (Moroni 10:32). That is, those who completely surrender and submit to the Almighty cannot deny—block, stop, or prevent—the power of God from coming into their lives. Because of who Christ our Lord is and what He has done, there is no obstacle to peace and joy here or hereafter too great to overcome. Our souls may find rest.

NOTES

1. See William R. Bradford, in Conference Report, October 1983, 100–101.
2. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 12.
3. Orson F. Whitney, in *Cowley and Whitney on Doctrine*, comp. Forace Green (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 287.
4. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 10:192.
5. Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 33.
6. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 244.
7. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:134.
8. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:160.
9. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:173.
10. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:323.
11. Sheri L. Dew, in Conference Report, April 1999, 84–85.
12. Orson Pratt, “The True Faith,” in *A Series of Pamphlets* (Liverpool: R. James, 1852), 3–9; see also *Orson Pratt's Works* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Parker Pratt Robinson, 1965), 51.
13. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 165.
14. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, October 1985, 4–6.
15. John F. MacArthur, *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 32.
16. Bible Dictionary, “Grace,” 697; emphasis added.
17. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, October 1995, 22–23; emphasis in original.

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18. Gene R. Cook, in Conference Report, April 1993, 98, 100.
19. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:91.
20. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:155.
21. Glenn L. Pearson, *Know Your Religion* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1961), 92–93.
22. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 131–32.
23. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 47–48.
24. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 166.