

The Powers of the Atonement: Insights from the Book of Mormon

Jared W. Ludlow

Jared W. Ludlow (jared_ludlow@byu.edu) is an associate professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

The Book of Mormon includes the significant subtitle “Another Testament of Jesus Christ.” As part of this further testament of Jesus Christ, the Book of Mormon stands as a vital witness of and source of information about the Atonement of Jesus Christ. It is amazing how much the Book of Mormon teaches about the Atonement, and I believe there is no better book of scripture that helps us understand the doctrine, significance, and testimony of Christ’s Atonement. This paper focuses on a few Book of Mormon passages that teach us about the Atonement and especially its power.

Probably all of us have had the experience of standing near a cascading waterfall or a raging river. The sheer force, deafening noise, pounding strength, and massive volume testify to water’s great power. Through technology, the potential power of water can be transformed into electricity by giant generators in powerhouses. This electricity can be transmitted over miles until it reaches our homes. Within our homes, electrical power can perform many extremely helpful and needed functions such as providing light and heat and powering appliances. After we pay a monthly bill to the power company, we can access this power with the mere flip of a switch. This source of power has become so commonplace that it is usually only when we have a power outage or go camping that we remember to appreciate it.

I would like to compare this electrical power to the power of the Atonement. The original source of the atoning power, comparable to the mighty water, is God. The powerhouse that transforms and

transmits the electrical power is Jesus Christ, who was given the mission and ability from God to bring redemptive power to mankind. While it might not be as easy as flipping a switch, we can have access to this power in our homes or lives by paying the price of repentance and wisely using our agency to come unto Christ and be His disciples. Just as electrical power can do many things within our homes such as running appliances and machines, lighting up rooms, washing clothes, and giving heat, the power of the Atonement can perform many necessary functions within our lives. Yet we often take it for granted and do not fully appreciate its incredible blessings in our spiritual development.

Sometimes we reduce the Atonement to a few things, such as the power to forgive sins and the power to resurrect, when in reality the Atonement encompasses many other aspects of our Father's plan. Perhaps then it would be helpful to use the term *the powers of the Atonement*. Then we might more fully appreciate how the Atonement can work by recognizing its effects in many different areas of our lives. Some of these effects include the Atonement's power to withstand Satan, forgive sins, heal infirmities, satisfy justice, raise the dead, strengthen weakness, and change hearts. We may not be able to comprehend everything about the Atonement, but President Boyd K. Packer has stated, "It was through reading the scriptures, and listening, that I could understand, at least in part, the power of the Atonement. . . . You need not know everything before the power of the Atonement will work for you."¹ President Packer also has pointed out, "For some reason we think the Atonement of Christ applies *only* at the end of mortal life to redemption from the Fall, from spiritual death. It is much more than that. It is an ever-present power to call upon in everyday life."²

Before discussing specific examples of the powers of the Atonement, we must first understand how to become at one with Christ and thus receive these blessings of the Atonement. Helaman 5:11 explains that first Christ was given power from the Father to redeem mankind. This key passage then describes the vital role of repentance in gaining access to that redemption. "And he [Christ] hath power given unto him from the Father to redeem them from their sins because of repentance." The second part of the verse further emphasizes repentance as the access point to the power of redemption: "Therefore he hath sent his angels to declare the tidings of the conditions of repentance, which bringeth unto the power of the Redeemer, unto the salvation of their souls."

Thus, one of the purposes of angels is to "declare the tidings of the conditions of repentance." We usually associate the word *tidings* with

Christmas and the tidings of great joy the angels proclaimed at Christ's birth. The 1828 definition of tidings includes "news; advice; information; intelligence; account of what has taken place, and was not before known."³ Here in the Book of Mormon are more tidings of great joy, as the angels help give the news, information, and knowledge of the conditions for repentance, and how we can receive blessings from the plan of redemption. And it is through abiding by the conditions of repentance that we gain access to the redeeming power of Jesus Christ.

Withstand Satan

If we now follow this train of thought into the next verse, we see Helaman reminding his sons to build their foundation upon Christ: "It is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, . . . that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo" (v. 12) In other words, one of the powers of the Atonement is that as we repent, a key part of building our foundation on Christ, He can give us power to withstand Satan, to remain steadfast when the devil's mighty storms beat upon us.

Forgive Sins

Besides the ability to withstand the devil, additional powers of the Atonement are described throughout the Book of Mormon. Alma 12:33–34 mentions God's plan of redemption that He revealed to man: "If ye will repent, and harden not your hearts, then will I have mercy upon you, through mine Only Begotten Son; therefore, whosoever repenteth, and hardeneth not his heart, he shall have claim on mercy through mine Only Begotten Son, unto a remission of his sins; and these shall enter into my rest." This passage teaches us that we shall have a claim to mercy through Christ if we repent. As we come unto Christ, the atoning power can bring a remission of our sins. Many Book of Mormon passages describe the cleansing power of the Atonement with the paradox of our garments becoming pure and white through being washed in Christ's blood (see Alma 5:21; Ether 13:10). According to Moroni 10:33, we can be sanctified, holy, and without spot "through the shedding of the blood of Christ." What a tremendous blessing to transform the stain of sin into something clean, pure, and worthy to abide in God's presence!

Heal Infirmities

Beyond forgiveness of sins, Alma taught the people of Gideon in Alma 7 that Jesus's experiences as part of the Atonement would help Him know how to succor people's infirmities. In verse 11 Alma says that Christ would suffer pains, afflictions, and temptations in order that He could take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of His people. He continues in verse 12: "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." Christ had to experience certain feelings and afflictions during His mortal life so that He could fully understand what *we* feel, thereby giving Him power to heal our infirmities. These infirmities include sorrow, sickness, pain, loneliness, and injury.

The power of the Atonement is thus infinite in healing *all* types of infirmities for each individual circumstance. It is a comfort to have a Savior who knows our personal, intimate needs and who, through the experiences of His suffering, can share our burdens and relieve us with His mercy. He can also provide restitution and relief for victims when mortal restitution is impossible or undone. For example, though a parent may neglect a child and cannot make restitution for the emotional trauma of that child, yet Christ's Atonement can provide a restitution of love, emotional strength, trust, and other blessings to the child, thereby bringing a healing power beyond mortal abilities. President Packer taught, "Sometimes we harm ourselves and seriously injure others in ways that we alone cannot repair. We break things that we alone cannot fix. It is then in our nature to feel guilt and humiliation and suffering, which we alone cannot cure. That is when the healing power of the Atonement will help."⁴

Satisfy Justice

Another power of the Atonement clearly described in the Book of Mormon is the power of mercy to satisfy the demands of justice. On the one hand, we are grateful for a just God who is unchanging and in whom we can have confidence to do right so that we can develop faith in Him.⁵ Yet the law of justice brings consequences for both right and wrong choices; if we bore the full brunt of justice's demand for our sins, we would be unable to return to our Father in Heaven and be exalted. But because of the Atonement, mercy now becomes part of the equation, and it can satisfy, but not rob, the demands of justice (see Alma 42:25). Alma 42:14–15 captures the dilemma from which we as fallen

mortals needed rescue: “And thus we see 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. And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, 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.”

Because of His Atonement, Christ now stands between us and the demands of justice. Mosiah 15:8–9 teaches, “And thus God breaketh the bands of death, having gained the victory over death; *giving the Son power* to make intercession for the children of men—having ascended into heaven, having the bowels of mercy; being filled with compassion towards the children of men; *standing betwixt them 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” (emphasis added). Christ is the great intercessor because He pleads on our behalf before the Father; He stands as our advocate before justice, satisfying justice’s demands. We eternally would be left out of the presence of God because of justice’s demands were it not for the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Raise the Dead

One of the most powerful and miraculous manifestations of the power of the Atonement is the Resurrection. Many Book of Mormon prophets taught that resurrection will occur as a result of Christ’s Atonement. Alma plainly taught his son Corianton that “the atonement bringeth to pass the Resurrection of the dead; and the resurrection of the dead bringeth back men into the presence of God; and thus they are restored into his presence, to be judged according to their works, according to the law and justice” (Alma 42:23). Jacob invited his listeners to reconcile themselves to God “through the atonement of Christ, his Only Begotten Son” so that they may obtain “a resurrection, according to the power of the resurrection which is in Christ, and be presented as the first-fruits of Christ unto God” (Jacob 4:11). Abinadi declared, “If Christ had not risen from the dead, or have broken the bands of death . . . there could have been no resurrection. But there is a resurrection, therefore the grave hath no victory, and the sting of death is swallowed up in Christ” (Mosiah 16:7–8). Mormon specifically pointed out that Christ was risen from the dead “by the power of the Father, . . . whereby he hath gained the victory over the grave; and also in him is the sting of death swallowed up” (Mormon 7:5).

The Book of Mormon peoples in 3 Nephi became firsthand witnesses to Christ's Resurrection when He appeared to them and allowed them to "see with their eyes" and "feel with their hands" the nail marks in His resurrected body (3 Nephi 11:15). This dramatic manifestation, coupled with the appearance and ministration of many resurrected Saints among the Nephites at the time of Jesus's Resurrection (see 3 Nephi 23:9–10), provides powerful evidence of the reality of our resurrection through Jesus Christ. As the Life of the World, Jesus is able to bring life to each one of us, even after our death.

Strengthen Weakness

A few Book of Mormon passages describe an initially perplexing interaction between us and Christ that ultimately leads to great strength and power through grace. Ether 12:27 contains the Lord's promise that if we come unto Him, He will show us our weakness. I do not believe God gives us weakness. Rather, our weakness is our imperfect mortal condition, in which many weaknesses are inherent (biological and genetic failures, limited physical and spiritual abilities, the veil of forgetfulness). While initially it may not seem like a blessing to see our weakness, the Lord knows His purpose in doing this. Just as a doctor tells us about our medical problems that need treatment, Christ shows us our spiritual weakness so we know what needs improvement. This process humbles us and helps us realize that we must rely on Christ in order to overcome our weak mortal frailties. We come to know that His grace, which ultimately flows from the Atonement, is sufficient to compensate for our weakness. And through His grace and condescension, we will have power to do great things, and He will make weak things become strong.

If we look at the example of Moroni, who feared that his weakness in writing would cause the Gentiles to reject the Book of Mormon, we see how the Lord has indeed made this weak thing strong (see Ether 12:23–28). How many millions of people have felt the power of Moroni's testimony and been changed by following Moroni's challenge in Moroni 10:3–5? Despite Moroni's feelings of inadequacy in expressing his thoughts into writing, his testimony and conviction come through and have a tremendous effect on the pure in heart. The same blessing of being made strong through grace can be ours if we humble ourselves and have faith in Christ.

Change Hearts

Another way that the power of the Atonement can affect us is bringing about a change of heart. The Book of Mormon is replete with examples of individuals who experienced a mighty change of heart and became strong disciples of Jesus Christ through repentance. Alma the Younger recounted his powerful transformation to his son Helaman in Alma 36. As he was in spiritual anguish remembering all his sins and his leading away many members of the Church (vv. 12–16), he remembered his father’s teachings about “the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world” (v. 17). He then cried to Jesus, “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death” (v. 18). And in that moment, the change of heart, the change of feelings, the change of discipleship occurred: “And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more. And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!” (vv. 19–20). From that moment to the end of his ministry on earth, Alma had a changed heart and labored without ceasing to bring other souls to repentance so that, in his words, “I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost” (v. 24). His change of heart and the change in the direction of his life were brought about because he called upon Christ, demonstrated faith in Him, and received His grace and strength. Alma could not do it alone.

Another dramatic Book of Mormon change of heart occurred in the people listening to King Benjamin’s speech. As he taught them about the future Christ and His atoning role, they realized their carnal state and cried out for mercy: “O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who created heaven and earth, and all things; who shall come down among the children of men” (Mosiah 4:2). After their heartfelt prayer, “the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ who should come” (Mosiah 4:3). A little later they testified to the truthfulness of King Benjamin’s words because of the mighty change that the Spirit of the Lord had wrought, a change so powerful that

they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). And they recognized that, as it is in all cases, the change came about because of their faith in Jesus Christ and in His atoning mission (see Mosiah 5:4), and they became children of Christ because He had spiritually begotten them (see Mosiah 5:7).

Conclusion

As we can see from just a few passages and experiences, the Book of Mormon is a valuable witness to the doctrine, reality, and power of the Atonement. The sweet, gentle, yet powerful Atonement is available to bring about a mighty change of heart and to keep that spiritual change alive continually. We can turn to the Book of Mormon to learn more about the Atonement because the Book of Mormon truly is another witness of Jesus Christ and His Atonement. It even contains Jesus’s own witness of the Atonement which He told to the Nephites: “I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning” (3 Nephi 11:11).

All the Book of Mormon prophets invite us to come unto Christ and receive the blessings of the Atonement. Jacob invited his listeners to reconcile themselves to the will of God and to remember that “it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved” (2 Nephi 10:24). And then he pled, “Wherefore, may God raise you from death by the power of the resurrection, and also from everlasting death by the power of the atonement, that ye may be received into the eternal kingdom of God” (2 Nephi 10:25). King Benjamin counseled that we can only overcome the natural man and become a saint “through the atonement of Christ the Lord” (Mosiah 3:19). Moroni warned us not to deny the power of God, “for he worketh by power, according to the faith of the children of men” (Moroni 10:7). Moroni’s conclusion to the Book of Mormon invites: “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, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God. And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot” (Moroni 10:32–33).

The invitation has been extended to us throughout the Book of Mormon to take full advantage of the powers of the Atonement through coming unto Christ. Sister Sheri L. Dew has described our part in our salvation:

Our responsibility is to learn to draw upon the power of the Atonement. Otherwise we walk through mortality relying solely on our own strength. And to do that is to invite the frustration of failure and to refuse the most resplendent gift in time or eternity. “For what doth it profit a man if a gift is bestowed . . . and he receive not the gift?” (D&C 88:33). . . . The Lord is our advocate, and He “knoweth the weakness of man and how to succor them who are tempted” (D&C 62:1). In other words, He knows how to succor *all* of us. But *we* activate the power of the Atonement in our lives. We do this by first believing in Him, by repenting, by obeying His commandments, by partaking of sacred ordinances and keeping covenants, and by seeking after Him in fasting and prayer, in the scriptures, and in the temple.⁶

We thus gain access to the powers of the Atonement as we pay the price of repentance and demonstrate our faith in Christ. And just as electrical power can be used to do many things within our homes, the powers of the Atonement can affect so many aspects of our life. It can help us withstand the powers of Satan, cleanse us from our sins, heal our personal infirmities, satisfy the demands of justice, raise the dead, strengthen weakness, and bring about a mighty change of heart. I am eternally grateful for our Savior, who partook of the bitter cup on our behalf and provided a way for us to endure through our mortal experience to salvation, and I am grateful for the Book of Mormon, which helps us draw closer to Him. Christ’s Atonement reaches into so many facets of our life because of His infinite nature and His perfect love for us. He has been given all power to accomplish all His works on our behalf (see 1 Nephi 9:6). **RE**

Notes

1. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, April 1997, 10.
2. Packer, in Conference Report, April 2001, 28; emphasis in original.
3. Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* shows what the word *tidings* meant around the time Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon.
4. Packer, in Conference Report, April 2001, 28.
5. See Joseph Smith, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 52–53.
6. Sheri L. Dew, in Conference Report, April 1999, 85; emphasis in original.