



Some Latter-day Saints may feel an innate desire to pay for their own sins through a sustained period of self-deprecation, falsely believing that the longer they suffer, the closer they are to paying the debt created by their transgressions.

“They Must Suffer Even As I”: Misconceptions concerning Personal Payment for Sin

CHRISTOPHER J. PORTER

Christopher J. Porter (chris@porterkinney.com) is a partner in the CPA firm PorterKinney, PC, and worked for Seminaries and Institutes from 2004 to 2012.

Soon after I was called to serve as the elders quorum president of a young single adult ward many years ago, the stake president gave me the difficult challenge to visit each quorum member individually during the upcoming school year. To this day, I remember one such visit to a young man I'll call Robert. It was evident when I arrived that something was troubling him; his gaze alternated nervously between the floor and his visitor but gave preference to the floor. At the outset of our conversation, he was reticent and guarded, but at my prodding he began to share a mistake from his past which he could not let go. A few years prior to our visit, Robert had cheated on one of his college exams. As an active member of the Church, he felt awful about his dishonesty and confessed it to the professor and his bishop but, in his apartment two or three years later, it was obvious that he had not let the matter go. "I should have known better," he said apologetically.

Over the last several years, I have met many people like Robert, who are in constant distress over their personal sins and weaknesses. Some are haunted by a distant memory, while others are troubled with ongoing sins which frequently beset them. I have tried a variety of approaches to help these people

increase their hope in Christ's infinite Atonement but have not always been successful. In the perilous times in which we live, this is a highly relevant subject as there are many who have succumbed to the temptations of the world and look back with deep regret. Perhaps the problem stems not merely from a lack of faith in the Atonement of Jesus Christ but from a fundamental misunderstanding of his redeeming sacrifice. This article will analyze one such misconception which, if clarified, may reduce the likelihood of individuals such as Robert suffering needlessly in the mire of self-denigration.

Doctrinal Surveys

In an effort to analyze the perceptions and beliefs of Church members concerning a potentially misunderstood doctrine, a nonscientific survey was conducted with 658 members of the Church early in 2017.¹ Survey respondents were first asked to select from a list of descriptive phrases that could apply to them and then asked two doctrinal questions, one of which was the following: "Please indicate if the following statement is true or false: 'If we repent, the Atonement of Christ will cleanse us but if we knowingly refuse to repent, we will be required to atone for our own sins in the next life.'" Sixty-five percent of those who answered this question identified this statement as true.²

The final question of the survey asked respondents if they had "any comments or clarifications for any of [their] answers." Over one hundred responses to this question were gathered, several of which expressed confusion about the meaning of the word *atone* as used in the question above. After discussing various iterations of this question with a small focus group, the author conducted a follow-up survey in 2018 of 410 Church members,³ and the question was rephrased as follows: "The Guide to the Scriptures explains, 'to atone is to suffer the penalty for an act of sin, thereby removing the effects of sin.' With this in mind, please indicate if the following statement is true or false: 'If we repent, the Atonement of Christ will cleanse us but if we knowingly refuse to repent, we will be required to atone for our own sins in the next life.'" Seventy-two percent of survey respondents who answered this question identified this statement as true.

The 2018 survey also included a question that invited respondents to read Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–18, then "check every answer below that teaches a correct principle concerning postmortal suffering." Respondents were then presented with five statements about postmortal suffering along

with a “none of the above” option.⁴ Forty-six percent of those who answered this question identified the following statement as correct: “An unrepentant sinner is required to atone for his own sins through intense postmortal suffering, thereby satisfying justice and removing the effects of those sins.” While the results of these surveys cannot be generalized to any particular population due to the limitations of convenience sampling, the data is nonetheless cited here as evidence of a doctrinal misunderstanding.

Will those who knowingly refuse to repent be required to atone for their own sins in the next life? A common scriptural reference cited during a discussion on postmortal suffering is found in Doctrine and Covenants section 19: “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; 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” (Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–18). Closely related to this scripture is Amulek’s statement that “he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice” (Alma 34:16). Clearly, scriptures such as these could be used to make the case that those who knowingly refuse to repent while in this life must atone for their own sins in the life to come.

A correct understanding of postmortal suffering, however, can only be achieved by analyzing Doctrine and Covenants 19 and Alma 34 in concert with other scriptures and the teachings of latter-day prophets and apostles. Elder Neal A. Maxwell counseled against teaching “the scriptures in isolation from one another” but instead recommended “[clustering] your scriptures together.”⁵ By clustering numerous scriptures and inspired writings, we can reach the conclusion that *in this life or the next, no mortal man or woman can atone for his or her own sins*.

Some Latter-day Saints may feel an innate desire to pay for their own sins through a sustained period of self-deprecation, falsely believing that the longer they suffer, the closer they are to paying the debt created by their transgressions. This misconception could be reinforced by the belief that Doctrine and Covenants 19 suggests that the unrepentant will be required to atone for their sins after this life. Robert and many others may feel the need to make up for their mistakes by suffering day after day or even year after year, but their efforts will prove futile. No amount of personal, mortal suffering, in this life or in the next, can atone for sin. Furthermore, the belief that a personal

atonement is required for sin may catalyze a withholding of forgiveness from another person until we believe the transgressor has suffered for an appropriate amount of time. The following five principles may help Robert and others gain an accurate understanding of the price of sin, the futility of self-atonement and the necessity of “[casting our] burden upon the Lord” (Psalm 55:22).

Principle 1: Sin Results in Suffering in This Life and the Next

Since “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), all of us who have reached the years of accountability will suffer to some degree because of our sins. President M. Russell Ballard taught, “Sin will always, *always*, result in suffering. It may come sooner, or it may come later, but it will come.”⁶ Death will not alleviate the suffering of the unrepentant but rather instead intensify its magnitude. Elder Orson Pratt explained, “The same spirit that is capable of suffering here, will be capable of far more intense suffering hereafter.”⁷

The suffering of the unrighteous in the next life is graphically illustrated by the teachings of Doctrine and Covenants 19 quoted above, where Christ compares the suffering of the unrepentant to his own suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane. Many scriptures (see Doctrine and Covenants 19:5; 101:91; 133:73; Alma 40:13) use the terms “weeping,” “wailing,” and “gnashing of teeth” to describe this suffering and make it clear that this particular suffering will take place after death (see Alma 40:11–14). The place in the spirit world where the unrepentant suffer is described in the scriptures as “a prison” (Moses 7:38), “outer darkness” (Alma 40:13), or simply “hell” (2 Nephi 9:12).

The scriptures make it clear that for all, save the few who become sons of perdition, this hell will be temporary. The Book of Mormon prophet Jacob taught that “hell must deliver up its captive spirits” (2 Nephi 9:12; see also Revelation 20:13). With the exception of the sons of perdition, those who suffer in hell will be heirs to the telestial kingdom.⁸

Principle 2: Fallen Men and Women Cannot Atonement for Their Own Sins

As cited above, the Guide to the Scriptures explains, “As used in the scriptures, to atone is to suffer the penalty for an act of sin, thereby removing the effects of sin.”⁹ David R. Seely, analyzing William Tyndale’s early translation of the New Testament, offers this helpful insight into the etymology of the word *atonement*: “In the New Testament, the verb [*katallassō*] is used in one passage

describing the reconciliation of one human with another (1 Corinthians 7:11), but it most often describes the reconciliation of humans with God (Romans 5:10–11; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20; Colossians 1:20, 22; Ephesians 2:16). It is this Greek word that Tyndale translates with the word *atonement*.¹⁰ Will the personal suffering that inevitably emanates from sin—either in mortality or postmortality—remove the effects of sin or enable a reconciliation of humans with God? The answer is a resounding no.

The verses cited above in Doctrine and Covenants 19 compare the suffering of the unrepentant to Christ’s suffering in the garden, but they do not imply that this suffering will have the same redeeming or atoning effect. Some may conclude that the intense suffering described in section 19 will be sufficient to completely satisfy the demands of justice, hence allowing unrepentant sinners to make up for their own sins; however, the suffering that originates from recognizing the debt created by our sins is not synonymous with an actual payment of that debt. To comprehend the doctrine taught by section 19, one must first consider whether fallen, mortal beings are capable of paying the price of sin.

According to President Joseph Fielding Smith, “The effect of Adam’s transgression was to place all of us in the pit with him. Then the Savior comes along, not subject to that pit, and lowers the ladder.”¹¹ Clearly, individuals who have fallen into a deep pit are incapable of lowering their own ladder or escape rope; as the Book of Mormon teaches, “Since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself” (Alma 22:14). President Joseph Fielding Smith taught simply, “Since we were all under the curse [of the Fall], we were also powerless to atone for our individual sins.”¹² President Joseph F. Smith stated, “Men cannot forgive their own sins; they cannot cleanse themselves from the consequences of their sins.”¹³ In order to receive a remission of sin, every man, woman and child born into a fallen world is entirely dependent on him who is neither subject to the Fall nor to any personal sins. As the hymn declares, “There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin. He only could unlock the gate of heav’n and let us in.”¹⁴

An intriguing analogy that illustrates the hopelessness of mortal beings in atoning for their sins can be drawn from the game of baseball.¹⁵ If a baseball player hits a home run on his first attempt of the season, that player begins with a perfect batting average of 1.000. The player may keep his perfect batting average if he continues to successfully make it to first base every time he is at bat. Suppose though that on his second attempt, the player strikes out,

giving him a batting average of .500 (or a 50 percent success rate). Now that he has made one mistake, there is no possible way he can restore his perfect batting average. Even if he gets 100 hits in a row, or any number of hits in a row, he would still have a batting average of less than 1.000. Mathematically, the only way that his batting average can be restored to perfection is if, theoretically, he could have an infinite number of successful hits. Since mortals are incapable of doing this, there is no possible way for him to eliminate the effect of one strikeout on his batting average. It is the same way with sin. An infinite Atonement is required to eliminate the effects of a single sin. Amulek taught, “There can be nothing which is short of an infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world” (Alma 34:12). Robert J. Matthews has explained, “An infinite atonement is an atonement by an infinite being—a god!”¹⁶ Mortal men and women are simply incapable of paying an infinite price for their personal sins. In the words of Elder Orson F. Whitney, “Because self-redemption was impossible, a Redeemer had to be provided.”¹⁷

Principle 3: One Purpose of Suffering, in This Life and the Next, Is to Lead Sinners to Repentance

Just months before his martyrdom, in the oft-quoted King Follett discourse, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught the purpose of suffering for sin: “So long as a man will not give heed to the commandments, he must abide without salvation. If a man has knowledge, he can be saved, although if he has been guilty of great sins he will be punished for them; but when he consents to obey the Gospel, whether here or in the world of spirits, he is saved. . . . All will suffer until they obey Christ himself.”¹⁸ In 1978, Stan Larson published a “Newly Amalgamated Text” of the King Follett discourse, which sought to provide a more accurate amalgamation of the four existing accounts of the sermon. This updated version adds some clarifying language to the final sentence of the above quotation: “All will suffer in the eternal world until they obey Christ himself and are exalted.”¹⁹

Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught the following concerning the teaching of Joseph Smith cited above: “All will suffer until they obey Christ himself; the Prophet said. (*Teachings*, p. 357.) The wicked and ungodly will suffer the vengeance of eternal fire in hell until they finally obey Christ, repent of their sins, and gain forgiveness therefrom. Then they shall obtain the resurrection and an inheritance in the telestial and not the celestial kingdom. (D. & C. 76:81–107.)”²⁰ In other words, the suffering of the wicked does not in itself

have any atoning effect but instead leads the sinner to the one source of hope: the Lord Jesus Christ.

This principle is profoundly illustrated in the parable of the prodigal son. In the well-known narrative, the departing prodigal squanders his entire inheritance “with riotous living” (Luke 15:13) and is left “in want” (verse



Sir Edward John Poynter, *The Prodigal's Return*, Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

The prodigal son fully expected to be disowned by his father, but instead received a warm embrace, a kiss, and the best his father had to offer—all of which remind us of the power of Christ's infinite Atonement.

14). Previously an heir to a fortune but now a lowly caretaker of swine, the prodigal experiences suffering likely unknown in his previous life, with the pangs of hunger and abandonment weighing on his sinful soul. The scriptural account does not elucidate how long he suffers until he finally comes to himself with the realization that many of his father's servants "have bread enough and to spare" (verse 17), and yet he perishes with hunger. He devises a plan to return to his father—not as son but as servant—and humbly beg his pardon. In "one of the most moving and compassionate scenes in all of holy writ,"²¹ the returning son, who fully expects to be disowned by his father, receives instead a warm embrace, a kiss, "the best robe," "a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet" (verse 22)—all of which remind us of the power of Christ's infinite Atonement to reconcile and to heal. President Russell M. Nelson explained that in "Hebrew, the basic word for atonement is *kaphar*, a verb that means 'to cover' or 'to forgive.' Closely related is the Aramaic and Arabic word *kafat*, meaning 'a close embrace.'"²² Those who suffer under the burden of sin can, like the prodigal, forsake their sins, confess them before the Father and receive the close embrace of our Savior.

What if the prodigal son had suffered for a longer period of time? Would that have made up for his sins? In reality, no amount of suffering as a swineherd would atone for his riotous living. The only way for the prodigal to overcome his sins was to return to his father and receive forgiveness. It is the same way with us. Whether in this life or in the next, no amount of suffering on our part will make up for even an iota of transgression—our only hope is that the suffering will lead us to return to our Father with a broken heart so we can be "clasped in the arms of Jesus" (Mormon 5:11). In this way, the postmortal suffering of the wicked will play a similar role as with Alma the Younger, who, after being "harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all [his] sins" (Alma 36:12), was lead to cry, "O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me" (Alma 36:18). Alma's suffering came to an end because he turned to Christ, not because he satisfied an inherent requirement to suffer for a fixed period of time.

In discussing this point, one should not assume that the rebellious can avoid suffering altogether in this life or the next through hasty, insincere repentance. The rebellious must be changed, and this change cannot come about effortlessly. President Spencer W. Kimball taught that "Repentance means suffering. If a person hasn't suffered, he hasn't repented. . . . He has got to go through a change in his system whereby he suffers and then forgiveness

is a possibility.”²³ Undoubtedly, the suffering that leads to repentance will be of varying degrees depending on the extent of wickedness and pride. In the seventh chapter of Moses, Enoch sees the God of heaven weeping over the extreme wickedness of the inhabitants of the earth which “shall perish in the floods” (verse 38). God speaks of their suffering (verse 37) and the “prison . . . prepared for them” (verse 38) but then gives this instructive conclusion: “Wherefore, [Christ] suffereth for their sins; *inasmuch as they will repent* in the day that my Chosen shall return unto me, and *until that day* they shall be in torment” (verse 39; emphasis added).

Leading sinners to repentance is one of the purposes of suffering and punishment, but it is not its sole purpose. As cited above, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught that the unrepentant will suffer “until they obey Christ,” which includes repentance along with other acts of obedience which enable a sinner to come unto Christ. Punishment for sin is also a requirement of justice,²⁴ and the suffering that comes because of sin can act as a motivation to avoid further sin (see Alma 42:20; Doctrine and Covenants 19:7). Additionally, suffering can stem from the natural consequences of sinful behavior.²⁵ When considering all of the purposes of punishment and suffering, however, it is imperative to recall the teaching of Nephi that Christ “doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world” (2 Nephi 26:24). Elder James E. Talmage clearly articulated this principle: “Hell is no place to which a vindictive Judge sends prisoners to suffer and to be punished principally for his glory; but it is a place prepared for the teaching, the disciplining of those who failed to learn here upon the earth what they should have learned. . . . No man will be kept in hell longer than is necessary to bring him to a fitness for something better. When he reaches that stage the prison doors will open and there will be rejoicing among the hosts who welcome him into a better state.”²⁶

Principle 4: Heirs of the Telesstial Kingdom Will Be Spotless, Entirely Washed Clean by the Atonement of Jesus Christ

Another misconception, closely related to the belief that fallen men and women can atone for their personal sins, is that those who inherit the telesstial kingdom will not be entirely washed clean of sin. In the 2017 survey cited above of 658 Church members, respondents were asked the following question: “Suppose someone has died, has been judged by Christ, and has inherited the telesstial kingdom (the lowest of the three degrees of glory). Please check every word or phrase that could describe a person who has

inherited that kingdom.” What follows is the list of answer choices followed by the percentage of respondents who selected each option:

- Redeemed (72 percent)
- Washed clean (40 percent)
- Spiritually dead (20 percent)
- Filthy Still (19 percent)
- Spotless (18 percent)
- Thrust down to hell (13 percent)
- Without forgiveness (11 percent)

While the majority of those surveyed understood that those who have inherited the telestial kingdom are no longer thrust down to hell and have been redeemed, only 40 percent described them as “washed clean,” and even fewer (18 percent) chose to describe them as “spotless.”²⁷

Seated in the John Johnson home in Hiram, Ohio, with Sidney Rigdon at his side, Joseph Smith received a grand vision of the degrees of glory, which among other things, clarified the vast reach of Christ’s redeeming grace: “And this is the gospel, the glad tidings, which the voice out of the heavens bore record unto us—that he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world, and to sanctify the world, and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness; that through him all might be saved whom the Father had put into his power and made by him; who glorifies the Father, and *saves all the works of his hands, except those sons of perdition. . . . Wherefore, he saves all except them*” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:40–44; emphasis added). The word *save* in this context cannot have reference to the Resurrection because the sons of perdition, who are born in this world, will be resurrected (see Alma 11:44); rather, this scripture teaches that even “liars, and sorcerers, and adulterers” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:103) will eventually be saved from their sins by the Atonement of Christ, on condition of repentance, if they have not committed the unpardonable sin. This is indeed “glad tidings” and testifies of the mercy and love of God toward all his children, even those who live wickedly while on the earth. As Elder John A. Widtsoe put it, “the meanest child is loved so dearly that his reward will be beyond the understanding of mortal man.”²⁸

President Joseph F. Smith’s vision of the redemption of the dead further clarifies that those who pay a penalty for transgression after this life are

eventually washed clean: “The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God, and after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions, *and are washed clean*, shall receive a reward according to their works, for they are heirs of salvation” (Doctrine and Covenants 138:58–59; emphasis added). Notice the careful wording of this scripture. Those who die in their sins will indeed pay a “penalty of their transgression,” which will involve intense suffering, but the payment of this penalty will not wash them clean or sanctify them in any degree. They will repent and be “redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God” and will be “washed clean” by Christ after their suffering has led them to repentance and obedience. President Smith’s revelation additionally teaches that even those who “rejected the prophets” (verse 32) will be taught in the spirit world “faith in God, repentance from sin, vicarious baptism for the remission of sins, [and] the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands” (verse 33). Evidently, in the postmortal realm, applying the sanctifying power of the Atonement of Christ is akin to that process in mortality, requiring repentance and obedience rather than a redemptive, personal atonement.

The fact that telestial beings are cleansed by the Atonement of Jesus Christ clarifies Joseph Smith’s revelation regarding the telestial kingdom: “And thus we saw, in the heavenly vision, the glory of the telestial, which surpasses all understanding” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:89). Heirs of the telestial kingdom will receive “of the Holy Spirit through the ministration of the terrestrial” (verse 86). The telestial kingdom, like the other kingdoms of glory, will be presented “unto the Father, spotless” (verse 107).

Perhaps some hesitancy in describing telestial beings as being “spotless” stems from a desire to differentiate them from celestial beings; however, the telestial kingdom is not equal to the celestial kingdom merely because its inhabitants are cleansed from sin. The revelations make it clear that those in the telestial kingdom will not become Gods but “servants of the Most High” (verse 112) and, unlike celestial beings, do not receive of God’s “fulness, and of his glory” (verse 56). No one should seek for the telestial kingdom solely on the premise that their sins will be removed for “where God and Christ dwell they cannot come, worlds without end” (verse 112). As was the case with the returning prodigal, forgiveness is granted to heirs of the telestial kingdom, but the father’s inheritance is lost.²⁹

Principle 5: The Atonement of Jesus Christ Is the Only Way to Any Degree of Salvation

A careful study of Latter-day Saint soteriology must consider this fundamental question: can some lower degrees of salvation be obtained through a personal payment for sin? The answer to this question is crucial if one is to obtain an accurate understanding of the Atonement of Christ. The faithful are compelled to decide between two mutually exclusive alternatives: either there is one path (Christ) to any degree of salvation, or there are multiple paths to salvation.

One difficulty in understanding the scope of Christ's Atonement is the many different uses of the word *salvation*. Depending on the context, *salvation* can refer to the Resurrection;³⁰ it can denote redemption from sin and hell, as in the revelation cited above that "[Christ] saves all except [the sons of perdition]" (Doctrine and Covenants 76:44), or it can be synonymous with exaltation, such as the Lord's declaration that "there is no gift greater than the gift of salvation" (Doctrine and Covenants 6:13). Whatever the exact meaning of the word *salvation* in a particular scripture, one point is clear: *no degree of salvation is attainable without the Atonement of Christ.*

Claiming that a degree of salvation is possible without Christ's Atonement contradicts the many scriptures which teach that only through Christ is salvation attainable (see Mosiah 3:17; 4:8; 2 Nephi 31:21; Alma 38:9; Helaman 5:9; Acts 4:12). The context of these scriptures and the meaning of the word *salvation* in each one is subject to debate, but whatever the definition of *salvation*, it comes through Christ. President Dallin H. Oaks identified several different meanings of the word *salvation* and then stated, "But in all of these meanings, or kinds of salvation, salvation is in and through Jesus Christ."³¹ Lehi taught this principle clearly, when he spoke to his son Jacob: "Wherefore, how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know 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).

Although the phrase "in the presence of God" in the above scripture undoubtedly reminds most readers of the celestial kingdom which is literally in the presence of the Father, the phrase can also be more broadly applied to include the presence of any member of the Godhead. Doctrine and Covenants section 76 teaches that those in the celestial kingdom enjoy "the presence of God and his Christ" (verse 62), those in the terrestrial kingdom "receive of the

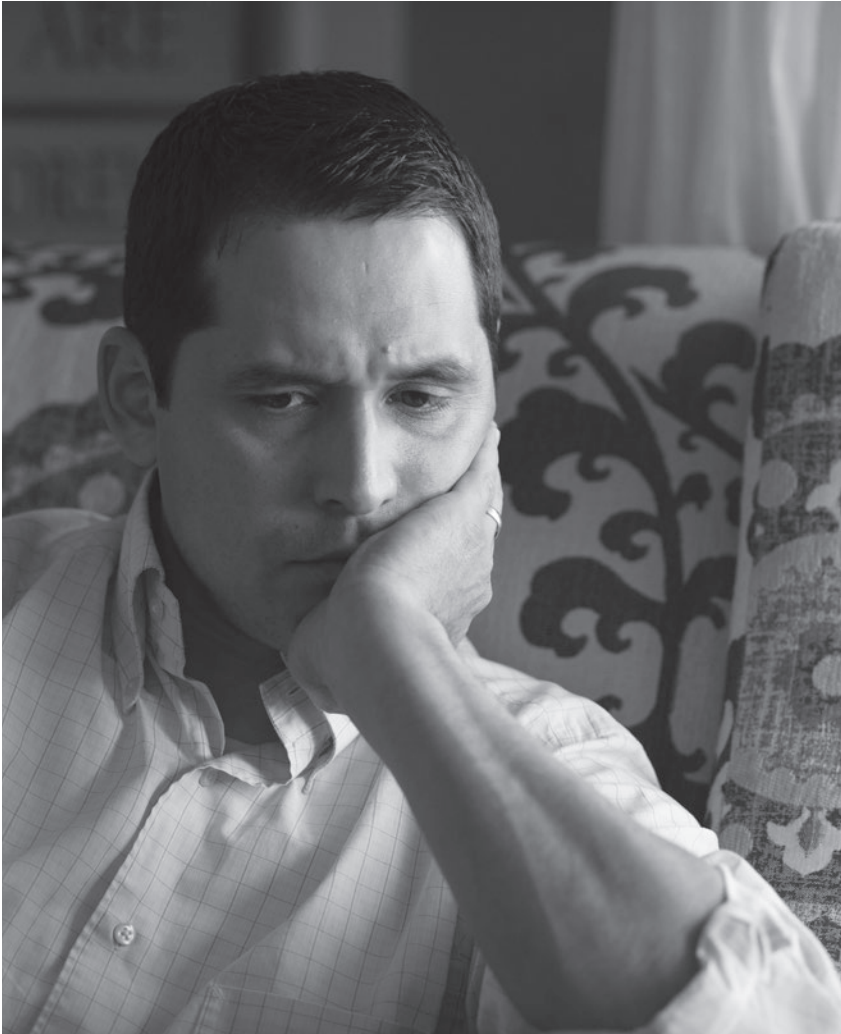
presence of the Son, but not of the fulness of the father” (verse 77), and those in the telestial kingdom receive of “the Holy Spirit through the ministration of the terrestrial” (verse 87). Lehi’s statement that “no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through . . . the Holy Messiah” (2 Nephi 2:8) may therefore be applied to all three kingdoms, each containing at least one member of the Godhead. Elder McConkie held this view when he taught the following about telestial beings: “Spiritual death ceases for those spirits who come up out of hell to receive an inheritance in the telestial world. (Doctrine and Covenants 76:98–112.) Although those in the telestial world do not receive the fulness of reward, they do receive ‘of the Holy Spirit through the ministration of the terrestrial,’ and consequently they are in the presence of the Lord (in this sense) and are no longer spiritually dead.”³² With unending mercy, Christ saves the heirs of all three kingdoms from both physical and spiritual death.

The Opposing Viewpoint

It is clear from the doctrinal surveys cited above, that some Church members hold a viewpoint that opposes the thesis of this paper concerning personal atonement for sin. With an appeal to select General Authority quotations, the argument can be construed that unrepentant sinners will atone for their own sins after this life. Researching vast digital libraries of past General Authority writings,³³ reveals more than thirty quotations by Church leaders that could be cited to contradict the thesis of this article. While students of Latter-day Saint theology should not demand or expect consistent rigor in all theological discourses by Church leaders, it is nevertheless imperative to address these quotations since the majority come from three authors who are widely cited as doctrinal authorities: President Brigham Young, President Joseph Fielding Smith, and Elder Bruce R. McConkie. A thorough study of these quotations, in their original context and in conjunction with other teachings by the same authors, reveals that none of these Church leaders believed that people could in fact atone for their own sins; nonetheless, one could still articulate a viewpoint that opposes the thesis of this article with an appeal to their writings. The following is a selection of these quotations followed by a textual analysis:

President Brigham Young

If as good a man as Jesus Christ went to hell, we may well expect that a wicked and ungodly man will go there to atone for his sins.³⁴



No amount of suffering on our part will make up for even an iota of transgression—our only hope is that the suffering will lead us to return to our Father with a broken heart so we can be “clasped in the arms of Jesus” (Mormon 5:11).

Any man . . . who humbles a daughter of Eve to rob her of her virtue, and cast her off dishonored and defiled, is her destroyer, and is responsible to God for the deed. If the refined Christian society of the nineteenth century will tolerate such a crime, God will not; but he will call the perpetrator to an account. He will be damned; in hell he will lift up his eyes, being in torment, until he has paid the uttermost farthing, and made a full atonement for his sins.³⁵

President Joseph Fielding Smith

Christ does not redeem any man from his individual sins who will not repent and who will not accept him. All those who refuse to accept him as the Redeemer and refuse to turn from their sins will have to pay the price of their own sinning. . . . If we are rebellious, we will have to pay the price ourselves.³⁶

Every sin committed must be atoned for. Christ came into the world to atone for the sins of all those who truly repent and accept the Gospel; all others must pay the price of their own sinning.³⁷

Elder Bruce R. McConkie

There are sins unto death, meaning spiritual death. There are sins for which there is no forgiveness, neither in this world nor in the world to come. There are sins which utterly and completely preclude the sinner from gaining eternal life. Hence there are sins for which repentance does not operate, sins that the atoning blood of Christ will not wash away, sins for which the sinner must suffer and pay the full penalty personally.³⁸

We know that, in a way incomprehensible to a finite intellect, the Son of God took upon himself the sins of all men on conditions of repentance. That is, he paid the penalty. He satisfied the demands of justice. He made mercy available to us. Mercy cometh because of the Atonement. Mercy is for the repentant. Everyone else has to suffer for his own sins and pay to the full extent the demands of justice. (D&C 19:16–19; Mosiah 15:26–27; 16:5–11; Alma 11:40–41)³⁹

Of the above citations, the two by Brigham Young are arguably the most problematic because he described suffering in hell as an atonement; however, in my research, these were the only examples I found where a senior Church leader used the word *atone* or *atonement* to describe the postmortal suffering of the wicked. Neither of these quotations comes from a general conference address, and neither has been reprinted in any post-1970 Church publication.⁴⁰ Both statements are best analyzed in connection with other teachings of Brigham Young, including the following that was later reprinted in the *Ensign*:

A divine debt has been contracted by the children, and the Father demands recompense. He says to his children on this earth, who are in sin and transgression, *it is impossible for you to pay this debt*; I have prepared a sacrifice; I will send my Only Begotten Son to pay this divine debt. . . . Unless God provides a Savior to pay this debt it can never be paid. Can all the wisdom of the world devise means by which we can be redeemed, and returned to the presence of our Father and elder brother, and dwell with holy angels and celestial beings? No; *it is beyond the power*

and wisdom of the inhabitants of the earth that now live, or that ever did or ever will live, to prepare or create a sacrifice that will pay this divine debt.”⁴¹

It is evident from the preceding quote that Brigham Young clearly understood the impossibility of paying a redeeming price for one’s own sins. Given this understanding, exactly why President Young chose the words *atone* and *atonement* to describe postmortal suffering is unclear, but a few possibilities can be considered. One possibility is that he used these words to convey a slightly different meaning than is conveyed in the scriptures. For example, one of the definitions of the word *atone* in Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* is simply, “to make compensation.”⁴² The suffering of the unrepentant can be accurately described as a payment or compensation⁴³ but not a full payment that completely satisfies justice, thereby removing the effects of the sin. Another possibility is that the wording of these two quotations as published in the *Journal of Discourses* differs from what Brigham Young actually stated because of the transcription and editing process of these speeches. In an article published in *BYU Studies*, historians Gerrit Dirkmaat and LaJean Purcell Carruth offer extensive analysis of the differences between the original shorthand accounts of two of Brigham Young’s speeches and the versions that were later published in the *Journal of Discourses*. The authors conclude, “Historians using the *Journal of Discourses* as a source should do so with an understanding that the examples given [in this article] preclude reasonably assuming a verbatim account for any of the published sermons.”⁴⁴

President Smith described the necessity of the wicked to pay the price of their sinning at least a dozen times,⁴⁵ two examples of which are cited above. The scriptures refer to the necessity of celestial heirs to pay “the penalty of their transgressions” (Doctrine and Covenants 138:59), a phrase similar to President Smith’s description. Other Church leaders have explained that unrepentant sinners will need to “suffer for their own sins”⁴⁶ or pay the “uttermost farthing.”⁴⁷ When these quotes are read in context and clustered with the words of the scriptures and other General Authority statements (many by these same brethren), one point becomes clear: whatever the price paid, penalty incurred or punishment borne, in the end, the sufferer is still in need of the Atonement of Christ to become clean again. Consider the following instructive quotation by President Smith: “the wicked of the earth who never knew the power of God, after they have paid the price of their sinning—for they must suffer the excruciating torment which sin will bring—shall at last come forth from the prison house, repentant and willing to bow the knee

and acknowledge Christ.”⁴⁸ If the paying the requisite “price of their sinning” made up for their sin, what need would they have of repenting and acknowledging Christ? Whatever price we may pay through our personal suffering does not remove the necessity of Christ’s Atonement. President Smith unmistakably taught “since we were all under the curse [of the Fall], we were also powerless to atone for our individual sins.”⁴⁹

Elder McConkie’s above assertion that those who commit “sins unto death . . . must suffer and pay the full penalty personally”⁵⁰ appears on the surface to contradict the thesis of this article and imply that some will indeed atone for their own sins. Elder McConkie clarified what he meant by “sins unto death” in another publication: “Eventually, all are redeemed from spiritual death except those who have ‘sinned unto death’ (D. & C. 64:7), that is, those who are destined to be sons of perdition.”⁵¹ The sons of perdition will indeed be required to pay the full penalty of their sins; however, the fact that their suffering will continue indefinitely provides further support to the notion that fallen individuals lack the ability to pay this penalty in its entirety so as to satisfy justice and remove the sin. Hence, the sons of perdition are “exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice” but cannot “satisfy the demands of justice” (Alma 34:16) through their own suffering. Additionally, Elder McConkie’s declaration that “mercy is for the repentant” and that “everyone else has to suffer for his own sins and pay to the full extent the demands of justice” can refer only to the sons of perdition in the eternities since testial heirs will eventually become repentant and hence obtain the mercy and forgiveness of Christ.

Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–18 in Church Manuals

It is difficult to imagine the arduous task of preparing curriculum for the various quorums and classes of the Church in a way that is consistent, historically precise and doctrinally sound. This section is not designed to cast a negative light on Church curriculum, the vast majority of which is impressively accurate, but instead it is meant to point out a few places in published manuals that could be altered to avoid reinforcing the misconceptions discussed in this paper. For example, the *Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Resource Manual*, first published in 2001 and printed until 2013, contains a lesson outline for the scriptures found in Doctrine and Covenants 19:4, 13–21. This outline suggests that the teacher write on the board, “Jesus Christ’s suffering made payment for our sins,” then later write,

“If we choose not to repent, we will suffer the payment of our own sins.” The principle of these verses is summarized in two sentences: “The atoning blood of Jesus Christ pays for the sins of those who repent. Those who do not repent will suffer the penalty of their own sins.”⁵² The phrasing and juxtaposition of these two sentences could have reinforced the misconception addressed in this paper that some of God’s children will obtain salvation through a personal payment of sin.

The current *Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Manual*, first published in 2013, is an improvement over its predecessor in its explanation of Doctrine and Covenants 19, yet it still lacks an important clarification. The manual instructs the teacher to invite the students to read Doctrine and Covenants 19:13–27 and then ask, “What will happen to those who choose not to repent of their sins?” The manual then states, “Students should identify the following doctrine: *Those who choose not to repent will suffer the penalty for their sins.*”⁵³ To avoid reinforcing a misconception, the manual should clarify that this suffering does not remove the effects of sin and that the sufferers will still need the Atonement of Jesus Christ after this penalty has been paid.

The current *Gospel Principles* manual provides an excellent example of how this topic can be addressed without promulgating a misconception. Under a heading entitled “Spirit Prison,” an explanation is given concerning those who “rejected the gospel after it was preached to them either on earth or in the spirit prison” and who “suffer in a condition known as hell.” Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–18 is then quoted with this explanation: “After suffering for their sins, they will be allowed, *through the Atonement of Jesus Christ*, to inherit the lowest degree of glory, which is the telestial kingdom.”⁵⁴

Conclusion

As cited above, the Guide to the Scriptures explains that “as used in the scriptures, to atone is to suffer the penalty for an act of sin, thereby removing the effects of sin.”⁵⁵ While it is clear from Doctrine and Covenants 19 that unrepentant sinners must suffer because of their sins, it is unclear from that section whether this intense suffering will remove the effects of sin. A careful analysis of section 19 in conjunction with other inspired writings leads to an understanding that the suffering of the wicked does not in itself have any atoning effect but instead is part of the repentance process and leads sinners to Christ, who alone can cleanse and sanctify us.

During my years as a professional religious educator, I met many people like Robert who have derided themselves for years over a past sin, perhaps mistakenly believing that this self-inflicted suffering would somehow make up for their sins. Wallowing in self-hatred and regret, these individuals for whatever reason refuse to apply Christ’s Atonement, opting instead to engage in a futile attempt to make infinite restitution with a finite capacity. Among other things, the principles outlined in this article may help such individuals realize that since no amount of human suffering will make up for sin, their prolonged, self-inflicted suffering is fruitless unless it leads them to repentance. We cannot atone for our own sins no matter how long we try or how hard we suffer. In contrast, the Atonement of Christ “begins to work the day you ask”⁵⁶ and will “[restore] what you *cannot* restore, [heal] the wound you *cannot* heal, [and fix] that which you broke and you *cannot* fix.”⁵⁷

The decision is this: we can rely on the Atonement now or we can stubbornly refuse and suffer, in this life and possibly in the next, until we finally decide to come unto Christ and rely on his Atonement. With this in mind, we should not view Christ as one of many alternatives for salvation, but as the only way to salvation. Nephi left little room for multiple paths to salvation when he said at the conclusion of an authoritative discourse on the doctrine of Christ, “This is the way; and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God” (2 Nephi 3 1:2 1).

In 1763, the Anglican cleric Augustus Montague Toplady, penned the words to a hymn that has been included in the Latter-day Saint hymnbook since 1948. The second verse of that hymn is a poetic treatise on the impossibility of atoning for one’s personal sins:

Not the labors of my hands
 Can fill all thy law’s demands;
 Could my zeal no respite know,
 Could my tears forever flow,
 All for sin could not atone;
 Thou must save, and thou alone.⁵⁸ **RE**

Notes

1. The survey was conducted online by the author from 29 January to 7 February 2017. The link to the survey was posted on the Facebook page of several Church members and on the Facebook group, “LDS Mommies/Ladies,” which has over 5,000 members. Respondents were asked to click on the link and take the survey if they were Latter-day Saints. Of the 670 people took the survey, 658 indicated that they were Latter-day Saints (only the responses

of those who indicated they were Latter-day Saints are analyzed in this paper). Of the 658 Church members who took the survey, 95 percent indicated that they attend a Church service at least once a month, 80 percent graduated from seminary, and 40 percent graduated from a Church-owned college or university.

2. Those that indicated that this statement is false were asked a follow-up question: “Please indicate if the following statement is true or false: ‘Those who have committed the unpardonable sin (denying the Holy Ghost) will be required to atone for their own sins in the next life.’” Of those given this question, 21 percent identified this statement as true, while 79 percent of them indicated that this statement, like the previous one, was false.

3. The survey was conducted online by the author from 1 August to 11 August 2018. The link to the survey was posted on the Facebook page of several Church members (the majority of which were different than the people who posted the 2017 survey) and again on the Facebook group, “LDS Mommies/Ladies.” Respondents were asked to click on the link and take the survey if they were Latter-day Saints. Of the 421 people who took the survey, 410 indicated that they were Latter-day Saints (only the responses of those who indicated they were Latter-day Saints are analyzed in this paper). Of the 410 Church members who took the survey, 95 percent indicated that they attend a Church service at least once a month, 81 percent graduated from seminary, and 38 percent graduated from a Church-owned college or university.

4. Here is the survey question in its entirety along with each answer choice and the percentage of respondents who selected each option: “Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–18 states, ‘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 . . . to bleed at every pore.’ Please check every answer below that teaches a correct principle concerning postmortal suffering:

Postmortal suffering is reserved only for those who commit the unpardonable sin and are described in the scriptures as ‘sons of perdition.’ [16 percent]

Those who inherit the telestial kingdom (the lowest of the three degrees of glory) will experience postmortal suffering before they inherit that kingdom. [24 percent]

An unrepentant sinner is required to atone for his own sins through intense postmortal suffering, thereby satisfying justice and removing the effects of those sins. [46 percent]

Postmortal suffering helps the unrepentant sinner to change and leads him to repentance. [37 percent]

Since no one is perfect, all of us will experience the postmortal suffering described in Doctrine and Covenants 19 [10 percent]

None of the above are correct. [16 percent]”

5. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Old Testament: Relevancy within Antiquity,” in *A Symposium on the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 8–9.

6. M. Russell Ballard, “Purity Precedes Power,” *Ensign*, November 1990, 35.

7. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 2:238.

8. See Doctrine and Covenants 76:84–85, 106–7 and Alma 40:14. Section 76 does not mention hell in connection with the terrestrial beings but does use the word *prison* (verse 73). Bruce R. McConkie did include terrestrial beings among those in hell when he wrote, “The great majority of those who have suffered in hell will pass into the telestial kingdom; the balance, cursed as sons of perdition, will be consigned to partake of endless wo with the devil

and his angels.” Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 350.

9. Guide to the Scriptures, “Atonement,” <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/gs?lang=eng>.

10. David Rolph Seely, “William Tyndale and the Language of At-one-ment,” in *The King James Bible and the Restoration*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 36.

11. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:123.

12. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:126.

13. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1899, 41.

14. Cecil Frances Alexander, “There Is a Green Hill Far Away,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 194.

15. I am indebted to my brother David Porter for this analogy.

16. Robert J. Matthews, “The Atonement of Jesus Christ: 2 Nephi 9,” in *Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1989), 189.

17. Orson F. Whitney, *Gospel Themes* (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1914), 11–12.

18. Joseph Smith, History, 1838–1856, vol. E-1, created 20 Aug. 1855–5 Apr. 1856, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/348>.

19. Stan Larson, “The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text,” *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 205. The italics in the original quotation, used to emphasize words found only in the Wilford Woodruff account of the sermon, are removed here.

20. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 816. President Joseph Fielding Smith taught a similar principle: “Therefore, when a man pays the penalty of his misdeeds and humbly repents, receiving the gospel, he comes out of the prison house and is assigned to some degree of glory according to his worth and merit.” Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:160.

21. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Other Prodigal,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 63.

22. Russell M. Nelson, “The Atonement,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 33.

23. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 99.

24. See Alma 42:16, 22; Articles of Faith 1:2; Oaks, *The Lord’s Way*, 222–23.

25. President Boyd K. Packer stated, “The punishment may, for the most part, consist of the torment we inflict upon ourselves. It may be the loss of privilege or progress. . . . We are punished by our sins, if not for them.” Boyd K. Packer, “The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 18.

26. James E. Talmage, in Conference Report, April 1930, 97.

27. Of the 658 Latter-day Saint respondents, 624 chose to answer this question. As with the other survey questions discussed in this article, the percentages displayed here are calculated based on the number of respondents who answered this question.

28. John A. Widtsoe, *The Message of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 167.

29. “We remember that the prodigal son wasted his inheritance, and when it was all gone he came back to his father’s house. There he was welcomed back into the family, but his inheritance was spent.” James E. Faust, “Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered,” *Ensign*, May 2003, 62.

30. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Have You Been Saved?,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 55.

31. Oaks, "Have You Been Saved?" 55.
32. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 758.
33. Searches were conducted by the author on lds.org, gospelink.com, google.com, and LDS Collectors Library 2005.
34. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:185.
35. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:268.
36. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:129.
37. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953), 4:161–62.
38. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 231.
39. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 56.
40. The first of these quotes has not been reprinted in any of the Church publications that can be searched on gospelink.com and lds.org; the second was quoted in general conference by President David O. McKay, who at the time was serving as second counselor in the First Presidency (see Conference Report, April 1947, 119–120).
41. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 14:71–72, quoted in "The Atoning Sacrifice: Modern Prophets Testify," *Ensign*, April 1974, insert between pages 40 and 41; emphasis added.
42. Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*—Online Edition, <http://www.webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/atone>.
43. Section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants describes those who have "paid the penalty of their transgressions" (v. 59); President Smith also described postmortal suffering as a payment. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:160.
44. Gerrit Dirkmaat and LaJean Purcell Carruth, "The Prophets Have Spoken, but What Did They Say? Examining the Differences between George D. Watt's Original Shorthand Notes and the Sermons Published in the Journal of Discourses," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2015): 27.
45. See Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:129, 2:96, 2:133, 2:220, 2:297–98, 2:299; Joseph Fielding Smith, in Conference Report, October 1958, 21; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 1:80, 2:210; Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation*, 2:57, 4:161–62; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Take Heed to Yourselves* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 296–97.
46. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 247.
47. Boyd K. Packer, "Do Not Fear," *Ensign*, May 2004, 77; see also James E. Talmage, *The Vitality of Mormonism* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1919), 265.
48. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:220.
49. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:126.
50. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 231.
51. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 757–58.
52. *Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Resource Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2005), 50.
53. *Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), 81.

-
54. *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 244; emphasis added.
55. Guide to the Scriptures, “Atonement,” <https://www.lds.org/scriptures>.
56. Boyd K. Packer, “Washed Clean,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 9.
57. Boyd K. Packer, “The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 18; emphasis added.
58. Augustus M. Toplady, “Rock of Ages,” *Hymns*, no. 111.