



Carl Heinrich Bloch, *The Crucifixion*

“This Is My Gospel”: Jesus’ Discourse in 3 Nephi

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The statements of Jesus Christ in 3 Nephi 27:13–21 regarding “the gospel” are unique in scripture. Nowhere else in sacred writ does Jesus personally define the term with such power, clarity, and simplicity. Nowhere else does he declare personal ownership or authorship of the gospel he preached and explain it as the carrying out of his Father’s will. And nowhere else in scripture does he connect so directly and succinctly his Father’s will with the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Final Judgment, and link them to the universal salvation offered to humankind. In this passage Jesus ties together the relationship between true discipleship, adherence to the ordinances of salvation, and his offer to stand as everyone’s personal intercessor to the Father. He starkly states that the absolute purity required for entry into the kingdom of heaven is directly and unequivocally related to the visceral image of washing one’s garments in his blood. In addition, 3 Nephi 27:13–21 might be described as a succinct tutorial on the nature of justification and sanctification. It stands at the doctrinal apex of Jesus’ post-Resurrection visit to the New World. It is a discrete unit, beginning and ending with the phrase “my gospel.” It is the culminating discourse of his other New World teachings on the nature of the gospel.

The Great Creator himself had come to earth to be lifted up upon the cross as a redemptive offering so that all humanity could be lifted up in a resurrected state and be declared guiltless if they became committed disciples.

Setting

The setting for this capstone instruction was Jesus' appearance to his disciples, who were "united in mighty prayer and fasting" after traveling and teaching the things they had previously witnessed and heard (3 Nephi 27:1). This is consistent with other Book of Mormon examples of the stunning results that come from mighty prayer. Nephi the First (see 1 Nephi 18:3), Enos (see Enos 1:4), Alma (see Alma 8:10), the sons of Mosiah (see Alma 17:3–4), and Nephi, son of Nephi (see 3 Nephi 1:11–12), are only a few of the many other witnesses that affirm the validity of this spiritual law. Mighty prayer is a conduit of power. It opens the gates of heaven.

The spiritual power generated by these disciples derived from their unity of purpose and united actions. They were following the precepts and example of their Master. At the end of his life, Jesus himself offered his great high priestly prayer, blessing his disciples that they would "be one, even as we are one" (John 17:22). Significantly, Jesus likewise prayed for his disciples in the New World, "that I may be in them as thou, Father, art in me, *that we may be one*" (3 Nephi 19:23; emphasis added). Much later, Jesus would emphasize the necessity of unity to his latter-day disciples: "I say unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine" (D&C 38:27). This is a kind of unity and oneness that some of us may not yet have fully grasped, but which is a non-negotiable requirement for existence with God—"the union required by the law of the celestial kingdom" (D&C 105:4).

So it was that, as a direct result of their united fasting and prayer, Jesus showed himself to the New World disciples. He answered their direct questions and laid the foundation for the doctrinal watershed and spiritual feast that would come in verses 13 through 21. The disciples learned that, in addition to bearing the proper and authorized name, the Church of Jesus Christ would be correctly identified because it would also be built upon his gospel (see 3 Nephi 27:9) and would display the works of the Father, which he would "show forth . . . in it" (v. 10). The name of the Church, the gospel it teaches, and the works of God the Father found in it are all inextricably linked. The Church of Jesus Christ constitutes the repository of salvation on earth.

"My Gospel"

After testifying that his Church was founded on his gospel, the resurrected Lord proceeded to provide definitions so that there would be no misunderstandings:

Behold I have given unto you my gospel, and this is the gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me.

And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil—

And for this cause have I been lifted up; therefore, according to the power of the Father I will draw all men unto me, that they may be judged according to their works.

And it shall come to pass, that whoso repenteth and is baptized in my name shall be filled; and if he endureth to the end, behold, him will I hold guiltless before my Father at that day when I shall stand to judge the world. (3 Nephi 27:13–16)

These verses constitute an arresting first-person discourse on the nature of the gospel by the very source of good news himself. Latter-day revelation defines the gospel as "the glad tidings" (D&C 76:40), and even "glad tidings of great joy" (D&C 79:1). This squares perfectly with ancient conceptions of the term. Modern scholarship notes that "the modern English word *gospel* is derived from the Old English *gódspel*, a combination of *gód* (good) and *spel* or *spiel* (news, tidings). . . . The original English word, however, was a proper translation of the Latin transliteration (*euangelium*) of the original [New Testament] term *euangelion*, 'good news.'"¹ This surely is the sense in which Jesus used the word with his New World Israelites as recorded in 3 Nephi. For what better or more supernal news could have been delivered to them than that the Great Creator himself had come to earth to be lifted up upon the cross as a redemptive offering so that all humanity could be lifted up in a resurrected state, overcome physical death, and be declared guiltless if they became committed disciples?

One of the greatest contributions of 3 Nephi 27:13–21 is almost simple enough to be overlooked: it is that Jesus knew and used the term "gospel," as a noun, in his own preaching, teaching, and exhortation. Though the noun *euangelion* is found in the New Testament gospel accounts,² some scholars believe it is "improbable that Jesus himself should have used the [Greek] noun or its Semitic equivalent,"³ which is *basorah*. Rather, authorities have attributed the first use of the Christian term "gospel" to the Apostle Paul.⁴ Certainly Paul spoke often of the message of salvation as "good tidings" and felt its impact deeply. The noun *euangelion* appears sixty times in his writings—in every one of his letters. But the fact remains that the Synoptic gospels say that Jesus used the term *euangelion*—"glad tidings" or "gospel"—when talking about

his own mission and message, and it takes a lot of argumentation to explain why we should not take the gospel writers at face value. Thankfully, 3 Nephi 27:13–21 clarifies the picture and prevents error.

But more than confirming the use of the term *euangelion*, or whatever cognate he used when addressing his New World disciples, Jesus unequivocally declared in 3 Nephi 27 that *he* is the author of the glad tidings of salvation. It is “my gospel,” he said, and this stands as a stark differentiation between his and other glad tidings or messages of “good news.” We know that other “good tidings” did circulate during the period roughly contemporaneous with Jesus’ mortal existence. For instance, a Priene calendar inscription dated to around 9 BC speaks of the birth of the emperor Caesar Augustus (emperor during the first fourteen years of Jesus’ life) as “the beginning of good tidings” to the world.⁵ It is interesting to compare how Mark introduces his gospel account: “The beginning of the gospel [good tidings] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). His introduction serves to announce to his readers that the good tidings of his report are different from anything else being noised about, including earlier reports of glad tidings such as the coming of a secular imperial ruler. The fact that he appeals immediately (v. 2) to the forecasts of messianic prophets to validate his message of good news indicates that he desires to have readers understand the covenantal significance of the real “gospel” and its link to Israel’s ancient authorities.

Generally, scholars seem to acknowledge that we depend mostly on Mark when we study the personal sayings of Jesus that contain the noun *euangelion*, “glad tidings.” Of the five instances in Mark, Matthew omits the word “gospel” in three of them, and “Luke (like John) does not use the noun [*euangelion*] at all in his gospel,” preferring the verbal form *euangelizesthai*, “preach the gospel.”

By declaring that the gospel he taught to his New World disciples was *his* gospel, Jesus also forestalled any possible attempts by imposters, false messiahs, or false teachers to try to offer another version of the gospel or another plan of salvation. This very thing apparently happened in the Old World. No less a figure than Gamaliel, the eminent doctor of the law, mentioned two such messiah figures (Theudas and Judah the Galilean) when he gave his speech before the Sanhedrin advocating tolerance toward the new Christian movement (see Acts 5:34–39). Jesus had even warned, while delivering his Olivet discourse the last week of his life (see Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:22–25), of other false Christs who would deceive the very elect.

Jesus’ miraculous appearance to the Nephites, with its attendant miracles and manifestations, was proof enough of his authentic messiahship and divine sonship. His subsequent declaration that the gospel he was teaching was *his* gospel, that he was its author, was then sufficient certification of the gospel’s truthfulness and effectiveness. Additionally, there was no better way to teach the disciples that they must not deviate from his prescribed gospel and follow another. (Even with his declarations in place, many did deviate from his gospel several hundred years later.) The Apostle Paul would similarly warn disciples in the Old World that only Christ’s own gospel, the glad tidings of the true Messiah, were valid, even though others might teach a different one. Said he, “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. . . . But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:8, 11–12).

In effect, Paul was saying that the gospel he preached was Christ’s gospel, not authored or established by anyone but Jesus Christ. Had Jesus given Paul’s speech, he might well have said, “It is *my* gospel that I gave to Paul and not anyone else’s. He preached it directly unto you without modification.” In this way, Paul’s warning to the Galatians parallels Jesus’ own declaration to the Nephites. It is *his* gospel and not another’s. He is its author and finisher. For this simple insight alone 3 Nephi can be appreciated.

Origins

The New Testament writers’ use of *euangelion*, “glad tidings,” and certainly Jesus’ use of it, should not be thought to have derived from a familiarity with classical Greek literature. This neuter singular Greek noun “is rarely found in the sense of ‘good tidings’ outside of early Christian literature.”⁶ Rather, as Millar Burrows has convincingly argued, Isaiah is “the main source for the Christian use of the term ‘gospel.’”⁷ This is not startling, given the Lord’s preference for Isaiah in both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, as evidenced by the many direct quotations he used from the great prophet as well as his endorsement of Isaiah in 3 Nephi 23.

A pivotal episode that helps us to understand the origin of the early Christians’ use of the term *gospel*, “glad tidings,” and particularly the disciples’ almost immediate grasp of its significance (without receiving any reported

explanation) is found in Luke's report of Jesus' visit to the Nazareth synagogue early on in his ministry:

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read.

And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach *the gospel* to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.

To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him.

And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. (Luke 4:16–21; emphasis added)

Some disciples, if not all, were probably acquainted with Isaiah 61:1–2 and recognized it to be a powerful messianic prophecy. Jesus looked in every way to be its fulfillment, the very one who was preaching *the gospel* in a day of triumph. In addition, there were other well-known passages from Isaiah that used the term “glad tidings,” which had to do with a coming deliverance of God's people, a messianic triumph, and a glorious future for Zion (see Isaiah 40:9; 52:7). These passages resonated with spiritually prepared, attuned Jews and caused them to expect a fulfillment of prophesied “glad tidings” of redemption and deliverance. Thus, when Jesus used the term, no great explanatory discourse was needed. What eventually did prove to be surprising, maybe even temporarily incomprehensible, to the disciples was that the “glad tidings” of deliverance and redemption came not by way of military might or the overthrow of existing imperial power, but through the ignominious death of the very one who preached the “glad tidings.” That aside, it seems that the New Testament disciples' understanding of the term “gospel” emerged soon after Jesus applied the prophecies of Isaiah to his own life and ministry.

The Father's Will

After claiming authorship of the gospel he had been teaching, Jesus described its essence, its core, as carrying out the will of his Father. “This is the gospel which I have given unto you,” he said, “that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me” (3 Nephi 27:13). By carrying out his Father's will, he acted as his Father's agent, seeking only to satisfy his Father's desire and plan. He had said this very thing earlier during his

mortal ministry: “I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me” (John 5:30). The constant and consistent picture presented by the scriptures from beginning to end is of Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son, seeking only to carry out the will of the Father.

In the grand council held before the world came into being, the premortal Jesus offered to become the executor of the Father's plan, “even the messenger of salvation” (D&C 93:8). On that occasion he said, “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:2). This selfless offer set him at odds with the “angel of God who was in authority in the presence of God” (D&C 76:25), who sought to carry out his own will and ultimately rebelled against the Father and the Son to become Satan (Hebrew “adversary”) (see D&C 76:25; Moses 4:1–4).

During his earthly mission, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus' plea was to have the bitter cup removed if possible. “Nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt” (Mark 14:36). Even as the intensity of Gethsemane's experience became acute, his prayer was the same: “O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done. . . . and [he] prayed the third time, saying the same words” (Matthew 26:42, 44; see also Luke 22:42).

During the very last moments of his life, and literally with his dying breath, Jesus proclaimed his fulfillment of the promise made in the premortal council of heaven. “Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, saying, Father, it is finished, thy will is done, yielded up the ghost” (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 27:50).

As the resurrected Lord, when he first made his appearance to the people in America, Jesus chose to introduce himself by declaring his obedience to the Father's will: “And it came to pass that he stretched forth his hand and spake unto the people, saying: Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. And behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and 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 11:9–11; emphasis added).

In a powerful, Atonement-centered revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith in March 1830, the Savior again proclaimed his identity to the leader of this new and final dispensation by making reference to the Father's will: “I am Jesus Christ; I came by the will of the Father; and I do his will” (D&C 19:24).

The scriptural record is impressive; in Jesus' every thought and action is found the consistent and singular theme of the fulfillment of the Father's will. The gospel of Jesus Christ, then, as Jesus himself declared to his New World disciples, consists of one basic, fundamental, overriding principle: doing the will of our Father in Heaven, subordinating one's own will to his, and having one's desires "swallowed up in the will of the Father," just as it was prophesied of the Son long before he entered mortality (Mosiah 15:7).

We have been told that the tangible expression of doing the Father's will in our day consists of living by the plan of salvation and participating in its ordinances. Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained it this way:

Salvation does not come to those who merely confess Christ with their lips, or even to those who go about doing good works (as men generally view good works). It is reserved for those who do the very things which *constitute the will of the Father*, namely: (1) Accept and believe the true gospel, thus gaining faith in Christ, and thus believing in the prophets sent by Christ to reveal his truths, Joseph Smith being the greatest of these in this dispensation; (2) Repent; (3) Be baptized by a legal administrator who has power from God to bind on earth and seal in heaven; (4) Receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, also by the authorized act of a duly appointed priesthood bearer; and (5) Endure in righteousness and devotion to the truth, keeping every standard of personal righteousness that appertains to the gospel, until the end of one's mortal probation.⁸

Not coincidentally, these are the very same tenets the risen Christ taught in the New World. For the disciples of Jesus, the Father's will centers on the first principles and ordinances administered by the Church of Jesus Christ. For the Son himself the Father's will centered on carrying out the great and last sacrifice in order to put into effect the terms and conditions of the Father's plan.

The Cross

The "gospel," then, in its most basic and pared-down definition, consists of the Son fulfilling the will of the Father, which culminated on the cross. "I came into the world to do the will of the Father, because my Father sent me. And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross" (3 Nephi 27:13–14). Some six hundred years beforehand, Nephi saw in vision that the Messiah "was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world" (1 Nephi 11:33). Even before that, the brother of Jared was told to "write the things which he had seen," but that "they were forbidden to come unto the children of men until after that [the Lord] should be lifted up upon the cross"

(Ether 4:1). And the great prophet Jacob desired "that all men would believe in Christ, and view his death, and suffer his cross" (Jacob 1:8).

Perhaps it is an irony of the modern theological world that one of the most noted and distinctive teachings of LDS theology is its emphasis on the central role of Gethsemane as a place of redemptive suffering. Yet the keystone of our religion emphasizes the cross, though such emphasis does not seem to receive much press or, at the very least, is misunderstood. One writer tells the story of a woman who asked a Protestant pastor engaged in ecumenical outreach how he could associate with Mormons, who "don't believe that Jesus died on the cross." When the pastor asked where she thought Latter-day Saints believed Jesus died, she responded, "Oh, I don't mean that, I mean, they don't believe he died for our sins on the cross."⁹

Jesus starkly and powerfully corrects such erroneous notions about LDS doctrine in 3 Nephi 27:13–21. In these verses the Savior boldly emphasizes the singular importance of the cross. Because we adore and worship Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, we revere the image, symbol, and metaphor that is the cross. This does not in any way diminish the importance of Gethsemane. We must never lose or even downplay our knowledge of Gethsemane as a place of redemptive suffering. Historically, the last we hear of such a notion seems to be when the Church father Irenaeus wrote a tract about AD 180 entitled *Against Heresies*, wherein he said that Jesus "sweated great drops of blood, . . . tokens of the flesh . . . bearing salvation to his own handiwork."¹⁰ But, on the other hand, we must never diminish the monumental importance of the cross. Thankfully, its significance is reenthroned in the unforgettable narrative of 3 Nephi 27.

Both Gethsemane and the cross constitute the awful, terrible suffering and sacrifice that was the Atonement. Elder B. H. Roberts instructed: "If it be true, and it is, that men value things in proportion to what they cost, then how dear to them must be the Atonement, since it cost Christ so much in suffering that he may be said to have been baptized by blood-sweat in Gethsemane, before he reached the climax of his passion, on Calvary."¹¹ On the cross, "all the infinite agonies and merciless pains of Gethsemane recurred."¹² Perhaps the Savior chose to emphasize the cross during his New World discourse precisely because it represents the climax of his passion, his suffering. As President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "He worked out [redemption] in the Garden of Gethsemane and upon the cross of Calvary which made his gift immortal, universal, and everlasting."¹³

It is instructive that during his post-Resurrection ministry among his original disciples in the Old World, Jesus also emphasized the cross by referring to the wounds left in his hands by the Crucifixion. Luke reports that the risen Lord proved to his disciples “by many infallible proofs” that he was the same being who had been crucified earlier (Acts 1:3). The language of the King James Version obscures the true significance of Luke’s remark. “Infallible proofs” is derived from the Greek *tekmeriois*, meaning literally “sure sign” or “token.” It was the tokens in his hands and feet that provided positive proof that Jesus’ crucifixion and death, unlike the thousands of others carried out in the Roman Empire, ultimately ended in resurrection. Thus, the Greek of Acts 1:3 might more directly be rendered, “To them [the Apostles] he showed himself to be alive after his great suffering, through many sure signs or tokens.”

Jesus will also identify himself to the Jewish people as the once crucified but now risen Messiah by means of those wounds, those sure signs or tokens left by the nails of the cross. “And then shall the Jews look upon me and say: What are these wounds in thine hands and in thy feet? Then shall they know that I am the Lord; for I will say unto them: These wounds are the wounds with which I was wounded in the house of my friends. I am he who was lifted up. I am Jesus that was crucified. I am the Son of God. And then shall they weep because of their iniquities; then shall they lament because they persecuted their king” (D&C 45:51–53).

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the cross in LDS theology. The cross is one of those universal symbols of God’s love and salvation that we share and cherish with the rest of the Christian world. We rejoice in the cross because of what it represents and are truly educated by passages like 3 Nephi 27:13–21, which tell us how our risen Lord felt about the cross and how important it is in the Father’s great plan of redemption. These passages teach us that Christ was raised up upon the cross so that all may be raised up to a newness of life. We also appreciate the eloquent expressions of other Christians about the cross. A. W. Tozer penned such a sentiment, which summarizes some of the teachings of 3 Nephi 27 as well as other Restoration scriptures.

The cross is the most revolutionary thing ever to appear among men.

The cross of Roman times knew no compromise; it never made concessions. It won all its arguments by killing its opponent and silencing him for good. It spared not Christ, but slew Him the same as the rest. He was alive when they hung Him on that cross and completely dead when they took Him down six hours later. That was the cross the first time it appeared in Christian history. . . .

The cross effects its ends by destroying one established pattern, the victim’s, and creating another pattern, its own. Thus it always has its way. It wins by defeating its opponent and imposing its will upon him. It always dominates. It never compromises, never dickers nor confers, never surrenders a point for the sake of peace. It cares not for peace; it cares only to end its opposition as fast as possible.

With perfect knowledge of all this, Christ said, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” So the cross not only brings Christ’s life to an end, it ends also the first life, the old life, of every one of His true followers. It destroys the old pattern, the Adam pattern, in the believer’s life, and brings it to an end. Then the God who raised Christ from the dead raises the believer and a new life begins.

This, and nothing less, is true Christianity. . . .

We must do something about the cross, and one of two things only we can do—flee it or die upon it.¹⁴

And so the meaning of the cross for us personally comes down to this: we can ignore it or we can embrace it and die upon it—meaning we can be transformed by it, crucify the natural man, and yield to the enticings of the Holy Spirit (see Mosiah 3:19). The Apostle Paul put it this way: “And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts” (Galatians 5:24). This was Paul’s personal experience; he stated, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Thus, committed disciples “crucify the natural man” and undergo a transformation on a regular, consistent basis. They do this by participating in that weekly priesthood ordinance called the sacrament, which focuses on the free-will offering of Jesus’ flesh and blood that culminated on the cross. It seems no accident that the discourse in 3 Nephi 27:13–21 came *after* Jesus had personally administered the sacrament at least twice to his New World disciples (see 3 Nephi 18:1–10 and 20:3–7). In these instances the sacrament seems to have served as preparation that would enable the disciples to understand the deep meaning of the relationship between the gospel, the cross, and the ordinance of remembrance.

The sacrament is the most oft repeated ordinance for us personally in mortality. Other ordinances of exaltation, such as baptism, confirmation, temple endowment, and sealing, are performed for us personally only once in our lifetime. But all worthy persons may participate in the sacrament in a personal, intimate way as often as it is administered by those who are authorized. This is exactly the pattern Jesus demonstrated for his American Israelites. We

are told that “the Lord truly did teach the people, for the space of three days,” but “he did show himself unto them *oft*, and did break bread *oft*, and bless it, and give it unto them” (3 Nephi 26:13; emphasis added). It seems ironic that the link between the sacrament, the cross, and the gospel is conveyed so strongly in LDS scripture, and yet so many in the world misunderstand the theology of the modern Church of Jesus Christ and its practices.

Just as the cross can transform us, it can also comfort us. Contemplation of what happened on the cross can help us cope when tragedy strikes or times get very bad. Knowing that God himself suffered unjustly and infinitely helps us bear our afflictions with greater patience and faith, giving us hope that we can be exalted because of the things that we suffer (see Hebrews 5:8–9). Making Jesus’ example of suffering on the cross our model can help us to “submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [us]” (Mosiah 3:19). Elder Jeffrey R. Holland observed that, although we may not understand why certain things happen as they do, obedience and submission to God (whether physically or spiritually) to the very end of our lives “are the key to our blessings and our salvation. In the suffering as well as in the serving, we must be willing to be like our Savior.”¹⁵ In a moving comment, writer Richard Mouw gave this insight: “We admit we can’t understand the mysteries of God’s purposes. But we can go to the cross of Jesus Christ. We can see that, at the cross, God took upon Himself abandonment, abuse, forlornness, depth of suffering. Christ Himself cried out from the depths of His being, ‘My God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ When we see what God did through Jesus Christ we can say, ‘There is a safe place in the universe, in the shelter of the Almighty, in the shadow of the Most High.’ That place is Calvary.”¹⁶

Lifted Up to Draw All to Him

So in times of sorrow and suffering, the Atonement draws all serious truth-seekers to Jesus Christ. This is confirmed by the author of Hebrews, who said we do not worship a distant, uncaring God, who “cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.” Rather, we can “come boldly unto the throne of grace . . . obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15–16).

But the Atonement also draws to Christ all those who contemplate the seriousness of their sinful predicament. The power of the Atonement will draw all men and women to the Savior because his sacrifice, culminating on the cross, is the only way anyone can escape the ravages of this fallen, sinful

world. That is really what the Atonement is—a remedy to the Fall. It is a way, the *only* way in fact, to fix that which is broken, the only way to restore wholeness. The remedy is so great because the sickness is so pervasive. Writing on the nature of man’s mortal, fallen condition, Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century French mathematician and philosopher, said, “The Incarnation shows man the greatness of his misery by the greatness of the remedy which he required.”¹⁷ The infinite suffering of Jesus in Gethsemane and on the cross is the remedy. And this was what Jesus is trying to teach when he said, “I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me” (3 Nephi 27:14).

Because he was lifted up, Christ is able to offer an escape from any permanent damage caused by a fallen world. It is a compelling offer. It draws us to him. It invites us, nay, entices us, to accept the terms and conditions of an offer so great that it results not only in a lighter burden for the moment, but also in “a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Jesus taught the doctrine of being “lifted up” during the last week of his mortal life, using much of the same language found in 3 Nephi 27:14–15, when the voice of the Father was heard. “Jesus answered and said, This voice came not because of me, but for your sakes. Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die” (John 12:30–33). That Jesus repeated this instruction to his Nephite disciples indicates its importance.

Furthermore, in the New World Jesus used the language of being “lifted up” to parallel and emphasize the “lifting up,” or universal resurrection, made possible by his sacrifice and his being “lifted up.” He stated that just as he had been lifted up, so all men would “be lifted up by the Father, to stand before [him], to be judged of their works” (3 Nephi 27:14). A final judgment for all humankind follows their resurrection. But note the following verse, wherein Jesus taught that both the Resurrection and the Final Judgment are brought to pass by the power of God the Father: “And for this cause have I been lifted up; therefore, according to the power of the Father I will draw all men unto me, that they may be judged according to their works” (v. 15).

The great powers of God the Father include the power to give life (see John 5:21, 26), the power (and the right) to judge (see John 5:22), and ultimately the power to raise up his children to his station and to glorify them

(see Moses 1:39). During his earthly ministry, Jesus taught of his Father's life-giving power and how it extended to the Son: "For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will. . . . For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself" (John 5: 21, 26).

Jesus also taught that, while all judgment rightfully belongs to the Father, the latter delegated all judgment to the Son (see John 5:22–23). In other passages in the New Testament, we learn that not only has the Son been given responsibility for judgment, but that he has, in turn, delegated that task to the original Twelve (see Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30). Such delegation of responsibility for judgment did not end with the Twelve in Palestine. An indispensable doctrine of the Book of Mormon confirms the continued delegation of responsibility for judgment. Later on, during this same discourse we have been examining (3 Nephi 27), Jesus reconfirmed his Father's role in judgment, and then delegated judgment to the Nephite Twelve for their own people in the New World: "And behold, all things are written by the Father; therefore out of the books which shall be written shall the world be judged. And know ye that ye shall be judges of this people, according to the judgment which I shall give unto you" (3 Nephi 27:26–27). More than three hundred years after Christ's visit to the New World, the prophet Mormon summarized this doctrine of the delegation of judgment specifically for the people of the latter days:

Yea, behold, I write unto all the ends of the earth; yea, unto you, twelve tribes of Israel, who shall be judged according to your works by the twelve whom Jesus chose to be his disciples in the land of Jerusalem.

And I write also unto the remnant of this people, who shall also be judged by the twelve whom Jesus chose in this land; and they shall be judged by the other twelve whom Jesus chose in the land of Jerusalem.

And these things doth the Spirit manifest unto me; therefore I write unto you all. And for this cause I write unto you, 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 3:18–20)

Thus, it seems there will be a whole hierarchy of judges who will act under Jesus Christ to judge all the posterity of Adam and Eve. Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote, "Under Christ, selected agents and representatives shall sit in judgment upon specified peoples and nations. Scriptural intimations indicate that there will be a great judicial hierarchy, each judge acting in his own

sphere of appointment and in conformity with the eternal principles of judgment which are in Christ. When John wrote of that day of judgment incident to the Second Coming of our Lord, he said: *'I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them.'* (Rev. 20:4)."¹⁸

Since no one will be able to ignore or escape the Final Judgment, over which Jesus Christ will preside, all people will be drawn to the Savior in this way as well. Judgment will be based on "their works" (v. 15). And as we learn from a vision given to Joseph Smith, the Lord also "will judge all men . . . according to the desire of their hearts" (D&C 137:9).

Justification Taught

Having taught his disciples the nature of his gospel, its unique connection to the will of the Father, the concomitant purpose of his atoning sacrifice on the cross, and the subsequent inescapable Judgment, Jesus once again brings his discourse back to focus on what he earlier called "my doctrine" (see 3 Nephi 11:30–40), namely, obedience to the ordinances of salvation. An indispensable part of the Savior's gospel is comprehended in the first principles and ordinances, as the fourth article of faith states. Earlier in his three-day ministry among his New World disciples, Jesus even called these principles and ordinances the rock foundation against which the gates of hell would not prevail (see 3 Nephi 11:39–40).¹⁹ Now, in this culminating discourse, the Savior declares that those who repent, are baptized, and endure to the end "will [he] hold guiltless before my Father at that day when I shall stand to judge the world" (3 Nephi 27:16). It is most significant that he says he will hold these covenantors "guiltless." It is not that they are completely sinless and perfect at that point, but rather that Jesus applies his atoning blood to them so that a verdict of "not guilty" is rendered in their behalf on the Day of Judgment.

Only Jesus' atonement and advocacy in their behalf puts them (us) back into a right relationship with Deity. This is the doctrine of justification, and it stands behind the graphic scene of advocacy portrayed by Jesus to Joseph Smith:

Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—

Saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified;

Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life. (D&C 45:3–5)

This is the apex of the good news or glad tidings that Jesus authored. All who comply with the Father's will are absolved of the guilt and punishment associated with each broken law. This is done by the simple decree of the Sinless One, who paid for all guilt and punishment and whose right it is, according to divine justice, to set free or require payment. The soul or inner being of the person being absolved may not, indeed likely is not, completely purified. But that makes no difference. He or she is still put back into a right relationship with God and set on the path that will ultimately bring the person to a state or condition of total purity. This is one of the messages of Mormon's summary found in Helaman 3:28–30 and 35:

Yea, thus we see that the gate of heaven is open unto all, even to those who will believe on the name of Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God.

Yea, we see that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful, which shall divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked—

And land their souls, yea, their immortal souls, at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven, to sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and with Jacob, and with all our holy fathers, to go no more out. . . .

Nevertheless they did fast and pray oft, and did wax stronger and stronger in their humility, and firmer and firmer in the faith of Christ, unto the filling their souls with joy and consolation, yea, even to the purifying and the sanctification of their hearts, which sanctification cometh because of their yielding their hearts unto God.

Complete salvation, which is exaltation, is a process by which we grow stronger and stronger in righteous power and become purer and holier. Justification, or being declared guiltless, precedes sanctification. The latter is a continuing process by which we are cleansed over time through the power of the Holy Ghost to make us more and more like God. By being put back into a right relationship with Deity through the Atonement of Christ, we enter that state of grace by which our inner natures are actually and entirely changed. The Apostle Paul spoke much about both justification and sanctification as separate but related aspects of complete salvation. Using the writings of Paul, author John MacArthur has described in modern terms both the nature of justification and sanctification. He points out their difference, but also their inseparability, in a way that helps emphasize the magnitude of what Jesus taught in 3 Nephi 27. MacArthur wrote:

In its theological sense, justification is a forensic, or purely legal, term. It describes what God *declares* about the believer, not what He *does to change* the believer. In fact,

justification effects no actual change whatsoever in the sinner's nature or character. Justification . . . changes our status only, but it carries ramifications that guarantee other changes will follow. . . .

In biblical terms, justification is a divine verdict of "not guilty—fully righteous." It is the reversal of God's attitude toward the sinner. Whereas He formerly condemned, He now vindicates. . . . Justification is more than simple pardon; pardon alone would still leave the sinner without merit before God. [But] when God justifies He imputes divine righteousness to the sinner (Rom. 4:22–25). Christ's own infinite merit thus becomes the ground on which the believer stands before God (Rom. 5:19; 1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:9). So justification elevates the believer to a realm of full acceptance and divine privilege in Jesus Christ. . . .

Justification is distinct from sanctification because in justification God does not *make* the sinner righteous; He *declares* that person righteous (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16). Justification *imputes* Christ's righteousness to the sinner's account (Rom. 4:11b); sanctification *imparts* righteousness to the sinner personally and practically (Rom. 6:1–7; 8:11–14). Justification takes place outside sinners and changes their standing (Rom. 5:1–2); sanctification is internal and changes the believer's state (Rom. 6:19). Justification is an event, sanctification a process. The two must be distinguished but can never be separated. . . . Both are essential elements of salvation.²⁰

The twofold doctrine of justification and sanctification is comprehended in Jesus' discourse in 3 Nephi 27. Notice what he says after he promises a decree of guiltlessness (v. 16) to those who receive authorized ordinances and endure to the end: "And no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom; therefore nothing entereth into his rest save it be those who have washed their garments in my blood, because of their faith, and the repentance of all their sins, and their faithfulness unto the end. Now this is the commandment: Repent, all ye ends of the earth, and come unto me and be baptized in my name, that ye may be sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost, that ye may stand spotless before me at the last day" (3 Nephi 27:19–20).

Purity is the requirement of heaven. As we immerse ourselves in the doctrine of the Atonement, and practice the principles that derive from this central act of the Father's plan, we become spotless. We wash our garments in the rich red blood of Jesus Christ, and yet they become white. In literature this is called an antinomy, an apparent contradiction. But its graphic nature points us to a sure reality. Only the Atonement of Christ and our obedience to its interconnected ordinances will allow us to enter the kingdom of God.

Justice of the Father

As one might expect in this gospel-defining discourse in 3 Nephi 27, Jesus also touches upon the "justice of the Father" (v. 17)—something that

he understood exquisitely from personal experience in Gethsemane's garden and on Golgotha's cross. If there was any doubt that the principle of justice ultimately issues from God the Father, Jesus resolved the question.

The justice of the Father requires payment for all the broken laws, wickedness, and depravity from the time of Adam to the end of the present mortal world. Jesus suffered the demands of God's justice and therefore suffered the wrath of God the Father. To be clear, Jesus absorbed the full force of the punishment deserved by each one of us, though he himself deserved *no* punishment. The full force of God's justice and God's wrath was not slackened for him, as the scripture states: "When he shall deliver up the kingdom, and present it unto the Father, spotless, saying: I have overcome and have trodden the wine-press alone, even the wine-press of the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God" (D&C 76:107). Elder Neal A. Maxwell elaborated upon this awful reality: "Jesus always deserved and always had the Father's full approval. But when He took our sins upon Him, of divine necessity required by justice He experienced instead 'the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God' (D&C 76:107; 88:106)."²¹ Those who will not submit to the purifying power of the Atonement through the ordinances found in Jesus' Church, nor endure to the end, will essentially experience the demands of "the justice of the Father" for eternity—"whence they can no more return" (3 Nephi 27:17).

Jesus elaborated on the requirements of divine justice to the Prophet Joseph Smith in a very personal revelation, using language so stark as to sound almost brutal. But, it is not so much the stark phrasing one remembers as much as Jesus' first-person description of the price he paid for all those who repent and embrace his suffering as an intimate gift of self.

Therefore I command you to repent—repent, lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not.

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—

Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men. (D&C 19:15–19)

This is not easy doctrine; it is not cheap grace; it is not warm and fuzzy "believe-ism." It is a frank portrayal of the Atonement's exacting cost to Jesus

and the Atonement's requirement of each disciple. It is an eyewitness account of the great and last sacrifice by the very participant himself. It seems very much as though Jesus, by recounting the experience, is plunged back into it with such perfect recollection of every detail of the exquisite pain that he simply cannot continue with the description beyond a certain point. And that point is symbolized by the dash at the end of verse 18: "and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink."

Yes, Jesus understands the Father's justice. He has tried to show his disciples a better way; he has offered mercy for justice. Those who will not accept the gift, or, more precisely, those who will not continue in the gift and endure to the end, will be "cast into the fire, from whence they can no more return, because of the justice of the Father" (3 Nephi 27:17).

Conclusion

One cannot help but marvel at both the doctrinal profundity as well as the rhetorical and literary power of the Savior's gospel-defining discourse in 3 Nephi 27, particularly its doctrinal core in verses 13 through 21. This is a unique passage; there is nothing like it in all of scripture. Verses 13 and 21 are bookends, discernible by the phrase "my gospel," used by Jesus to identify personally the essence of the plan of salvation. Nowhere else in scripture do we find the connections that Jesus made on that occasion for his audience. There is a compelling persuasiveness to the simplicity and succinctness of his words. We see once again how the Master has the incomparable ability to boil things down to their fundamental aspects, define expectations, point us to his Church, and leave us to choose. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, this is my gospel; and ye know the things that ye must do in my church; for the works which ye have seen me do that shall ye also do; for that which ye have seen me do even that shall ye do" (3 Nephi 27:21).

As we contemplate this verse in our quiet moments we hear the Savior summarize for us all his teachings in 3 Nephi: "You now know what the gospel is; you know it is found in my church; you know what you must do; you know that it is only my gospel that will allow you to be *with* God and be *like* God." In commentary both elevating and instructing, Elder Bruce R. McConkie said,

Viewed from our mortal position, the gospel is all that is required to take us back to the Eternal Presence, there to be crowned with glory and honor, immortality and eternal life. To gain these greatest of all rewards, two things are required. The first is

the atonement by which all men are raised in immortality, with those who believe and obey ascending also unto eternal life. This atoning sacrifice was the work of our Blessed Lord, and he has done his work. The second requisite is obedience on our part to the laws and ordinances of the gospel. Thus the gospel, is, in effect, the atonement. But the gospel is also all of the laws, principles, doctrines, rites, ordinances, acts, powers, authorities, and keys needed to save and exalt fallen man in the highest heaven hereafter.²²

Jesus “closed his visit to the Nephites as he began it, with the fundamental declaration that he had come into the world to do the will of the Father.”²³ He then urged all to do likewise: “Therefore, what manner of men [and women] ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). Where his gospel is concerned it is all a matter of “will”—whether we choose to follow God’s or our own. This is the heart of the issue. The former way leads to glory; the latter to misery. This was the message of Jesus’ gospel-defining discourse in the New World. This is truly good news. **RE**

Notes

1. M. Eugene Boring, “Gospel Message,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006–8), 2:629.
2. The surprising exception is John. He does not mention it.
3. O. A. Piper, “Gospel (Message),” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:443.
4. Millar Burrows, “The Origin of the Term ‘Gospel,’” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 44, no. 1/2 (1925), 22.
5. Burrows, “Origin of the Term ‘Gospel,’” 21.
6. Burrows, “Origin of the Term ‘Gospel,’” 21.
7. Burrows, “Origin of the Term ‘Gospel,’” 31.
8. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1976), 1:254; emphasis added.
9. Robert L. Millet, *What Happened to the Cross?* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 103.
10. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3:22:2, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 1:454–55.
11. B. H. Roberts, *Seventy’s Course in Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1907–12), 4:126.
12. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Purifying Power of Gethsemane,” *Ensign*, May 1985, 9.
13. Gordon B. Hinckley, “A Season for Gratitude,” *Ensign*, December 1997, 2.
14. A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1955), 61–63.
15. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2006), 304.
16. Richard S. Mouw, “Christian Responses to a World in Crisis,” *Fuller Focus*, Spring 2002, 11.

17. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, part 7, 526.
18. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 398.
19. Both the Articles of Faith and the Savior’s teachings in 3 Nephi indicate that the Savior’s “gospel” and his “doctrine” are not exact equivalents. Article of Faith 4 defines faith, repentance, baptism, and receipt of the gift of the Holy Ghost as the first principles and ordinances of the gospel. His “gospel,” as he defines it in 3 Nephi 27:13–21, seems broader than his “doctrine” described in 3 Nephi 11:30–40. His gospel touches upon matters of central importance not explicitly laid out in 3 Nephi 11. It might be said that what Jesus gives to us in 3 Nephi 27:15–17 is the *law* of the gospel (as mentioned in other holy places), that is, his personal assurance of our being held guiltless if we follow the path of faith, repentance, baptism, receipt of the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end in righteousness. For a different view, namely that his “gospel” and his “doctrine” are equivalents and interchangeable, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets,” *BYU Studies* 31, no. 3, (1991), 31–50.
20. John F. MacArthur, *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 89–90.
21. Neal A. Maxwell, *Lord, Increase Our Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), 13.
22. Bruce R. McConkie, *New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 134.
23. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant*, 303.