

Elder Bruce C. Hafen

The Restoration's unique doctrine of the Atonement

In recent years we Latter-day Saints have been teaching, singing, and testifying much more about the Savior Jesus Christ. I rejoice that we are rejoicing more.

As we “talk [more] of Christ,”¹ the gospel’s doctrinal fullness will come out of obscurity. For example, some of our friends can’t see how our Atonement beliefs relate to our beliefs about becoming more like our Heavenly Father. Others *mistakenly* think our Church is moving toward an understanding of the relationship between grace and works that draws on Protestant teachings. Such misconceptions prompt me to consider today the Restoration’s unique Atonement doctrine.

God’s plan is developmental

The Lord restored His gospel through Joseph Smith because there had been an apostasy. Since the fifth century, Christianity taught that Adam and Eve’s Fall was a tragic mistake, which led to the belief that humankind has an inherently evil nature. That view is wrong—not only about the Fall and human nature, but about the very purpose of life.

The Fall was not a disaster. It wasn’t a mistake or an accident. It was a deliberate part of the plan of salvation. We are God’s spirit “offspring,”² sent to earth “innocent”³ of Adam’s transgression. Yet our Father’s plan subjects us to temptation and misery in this fallen world as the price to comprehend authentic joy. Without tasting the bitter, we actually *cannot* understand the sweet.⁴ We require mortality’s discipline and refinement as the “next step in [our] development” toward becoming like our Father.⁵ But growth means growing pains. It also means learning from our mistakes in a continual process made possible by the Savior’s grace, which He extends both during and “*after all we can do.*”⁶

Adam and Eve learned constantly from their often harsh experience. They knew how a troubled family feels. Think of Cain and Abel. Yet because of the Atonement, they could *learn from their experience without being condemned by it*. Christ’s sacrifice didn’t just erase their choices and return them to an Eden of innocence. That would be a story with no plot and no character growth. His plan is *developmental*—line upon line, step by step, grace for grace.

So if you have problems in your life, don’t assume there is something wrong with you. Struggling with those problems is at the very core of life’s purpose. As we draw close to God, He will show us our weaknesses and through them make us wiser, stronger.⁷ If you’re seeing more of your weaknesses, that just might mean you’re moving nearer to God, not farther away.

The Savior’s grace helps us grow

One early Australian convert said: “My past life [was] a wilderness of weeds, with hardly a flower Strewed among them. [But] now . . . the weeds have vanished, and flowers Spring up in their place.”⁸

We grow in two ways—removing negative weeds and cultivating positive flowers. The Savior’s grace blesses both parts—if we do our part. First and repeatedly we must uproot the weeds of sin and bad choices. It isn’t enough just to *mow* the weeds. Yank them out by the roots, repenting fully to satisfy the conditions of mercy. But being forgiven is only part of our growth. We are not just paying a debt. Our purpose is to become celestial beings. So once we’ve cleared our heartland, we must continually plant, weed, and nourish the seeds of divine qualities. And then as our sweat and discipline stretch us to meet His gifts, “the flow’rs of grace appear,”⁹ like hope and meekness. Even a tree of life can take root in this heart-garden, bearing fruit so sweet that it lightens all our bur-

dens “through the joy of his Son.”¹⁰ And when the flower of charity blooms here, we will love others with the power of Christ’s own love.¹¹

We must give all we have, as Christ did

We need grace both to overcome sinful weeds and to grow divine flowers. We can do neither one fully by ourselves. But grace is not cheap. It is very expensive, even very *dear*. How much does this grace cost? Is it enough simply to believe in Christ? The man who found the pearl of great price gave “*all that he had*”¹² for it. If we desire “all that [the] Father hath,”¹³ God asks all that we have. To qualify for such exquisite treasure, in whatever way is ours, we must give the way Christ gave—every drop He had: “How exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not.”¹⁴ Paul said, “*If so be that we suffer with him,*” we are “joint-heirs with Christ.”¹⁵ All of His heart; all of our hearts.

What possible pearl could be worth such a price—for Him and for us? This earth is not our home. We are away at school, trying to master the lessons of “the great plan of happiness”¹⁶ so we can return home and *know what it means to be there*. Over and over the Lord tells us why the plan is worth our sacrifice—and His. Eve called it “the joy of our redemption.”¹⁷ Jacob called it “that happiness which is prepared for the saints.”¹⁸ Of necessity the plan is full of thorns and tears—His and ours. But because He and we are so totally in this together, our being “at one” with Him in overcoming all opposition will itself bring us “incomprehensible joy.”¹⁹

Christ’s Atonement is at the very core of this plan. Without His dear, dear sacrifice, there would be no way home, no way to be together, no way to be like Him. He gave us all *He* had. Therefore, “how great is *his* joy”²⁰ when even one of us “gets it”—when we look up from the weed patch and turn our face to the Son.

Only the restored gospel has the fullness of these truths! Yet the adversary is

engaged in one of history’s greatest cover-ups, trying to persuade people that this Church knows least—when in fact it knows most—about how our relationship with Christ makes true Christians of us.

Giving almost everything is not enough

If we must give all that we have, then our giving only *almost* everything is not enough. If we *almost* keep the commandments, we *almost* receive the blessings. For example, some young people assume they can romp in sinful mud until taking a shower of repentance just before being interviewed for a mission or the temple. In the very act of transgression, some plan to repent. They mock the gift of mercy that true repentance allows.

Some people want to keep one hand on the wall of the temple while touching the world’s “unclean things”²¹ with the other hand. We must put both hands on the temple and hold on for dear life. One hand is not even *almost* enough.

The rich young man had given *almost* everything. When the Savior told him he must sell *all* his possessions, that wasn’t just a story about riches.²² We can have eternal life if we want it, but only if there is *nothing else* we want more.

So we must willingly give everything, because God Himself can’t make us grow against our will and without our full participation. Yet even when we utterly spend ourselves, we lack the power to create the perfection only God can complete. Our *all* by itself is still only *almost* enough—until it is finished by the *all* of Him who is the “finisher of our faith.”²³ At that point, our imperfect but consecrated *almost* is enough.

Observing our covenants by sacrifice

My friend Donna grew up desiring to marry and raise a large family. But that blessing never came. Instead she spent her adult years serving the people in her ward with unmeasured compassion and counseling disturbed children in a large school

district. She had crippling arthritis and many long, blue days. Yet she always lifted and was always lifted by her friends and family. Once when teaching about Lehi's dream, she said with gentle humor, "I'd put myself in that picture on the strait and narrow path, still holding to the iron rod but collapsed from fatigue right on the path." In an inspired blessing given just before her death, Donna's home teacher said the Lord "accepted" her. Donna cried. She had never felt her single life was acceptable. But the Lord said those who "observe their covenants *by sacrifice . . .* are accepted of me."²⁴ I can envision Him walking the path from the tree of life to lift Donna up with gladness and carry her home.

Consider others who, like Donna, have consecrated themselves so fully that, for them, *almost* is enough:

Many missionaries in Europe and similar places who never stop offering their bruised hearts despite continual rejection.

Those handcart pioneers who said they came to know God in their extremities and the price they paid to know Him was a privilege to pay.

A father who reached his outermost limits but still couldn't influence his daughter's choices; he could only crawl toward the Lord, pleading like Alma for his child.

A wife who encouraged her husband despite his years of weakness, until the seeds of repentance finally sprouted in his heart. She said, "I tried to look at him the way Christ would look at me."

A husband whose wife suffered for years from a disabling emotional disorder, but to him it was always "our little challenge"—never just "her illness." In the realm of their marriage, he was afflicted in her afflictions,²⁵ just as Christ in His infinite realm was afflicted in our afflictions.²⁶

"We shall be like him"

The people in 3 Nephi 17 had survived destruction, doubt, and darkness just to get to the temple with Jesus. After listen-

ing to Him for hours in wonder, they grew too weary to comprehend Him. As He prepared to leave, they tearfully looked at Him with such total desire that He stayed and blessed their afflicted ones and their children. They didn't even understand Him, but they wanted to be *with Him* more than they wanted any other thing. So He stayed. Their *almost* was enough.

Almost is especially enough when our own sacrifices somehow echo the Savior's sacrifice, however imperfect we are. We cannot really feel charity—Christ's love for others—without at least tasting His suffering for others, because the love and the suffering are but two sides of a single reality. When we really are afflicted in the afflictions of other people, we may enter "the fellowship of his sufferings"²⁷ enough to become joint-heirs with Him.

May we not shrink when we discover, paradoxically, how dear a price we must pay to receive what is, finally, a gift from Him. When the Savior's all and our all come together, we will find not only forgiveness of sin, "we shall see him as he is," and "we shall be *like him*."²⁸ I love Him. I want to be with Him. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTES

1. 2 Nephi 25:26.
2. See Acts 17:28.
3. See Doctrine and Covenants 93:38.
4. See Doctrine and Covenants 29:39.
5. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (1997), 207.
6. 2 Nephi 25:23; italics added.
7. See Ether 12:27.
8. Martha Maria Humphreys, in Marjorie Newton, *Southern Cross Saints: The Mormons in Australia* (1991), 158.
9. "There Is Sunshine in My Soul Today," *Hymns*, no. 227.
10. Alma 33:23.
11. See Moroni 7:48.
12. Matthew 13:46; italics added; see also Alma 22:15.
13. Doctrine and Covenants 84:38.

14. Doctrine and Covenants 19:15.
15. Romans 8:17; italics added.
16. Alma 42:8.
17. Moses 5:11.
18. 2 Nephi 9:43.
19. Alma 28:8.
20. Doctrine and Covenants 18:13; italics added.
21. Alma 5:57.
22. See Matthew 19:16–22.
23. Hebrews 12:2; see also Moroni 6:4.
24. Doctrine and Covenants 97:8; italics added.
25. See Doctrine and Covenants 30:6.
26. See Doctrine and Covenants 133:53.
27. Philippians 3:10.
28. Moroni 7:48; 1 John 3:2; italics added.

Elder Richard G. Scott

A time of great challenges, opportunities

Excellent suggestions to combat the deteriorating world environment have been given in this conference. As a prophet of God, President Gordon B. Hinckley put world conditions and our opportunities into crystal-clear perspective. Two of his recent comments to priesthood and auxiliary leaders illustrate that prophetic vision. First, regarding the challenge we face:

“The traditional family is under heavy attack. I do not know that things were worse in the times of Sodom and Gomorrah. . . . We see similar conditions today. They prevail all across the world. I think our Father must weep as He looks down upon His wayward sons and daughters.”¹

Now concerning our extraordinary opportunities:

“Who in the earlier days could have dreamed of this season of opportunity in which we live? . . . The Church is in wonderful condition. . . . It will grow and strengthen. . . . It is our opportunity and our challenge to continue in this great undertaking, the future of which we can scarcely imagine.”²

Much evil and darkness in the world

You have a choice. You can wring your hands and be consumed with concern for the future, or you can choose to use the counsel the Lord has given to live with

peace and happiness in a world awash with evil. If you choose to concentrate on the dark side, this is what you will see. Much of the world is being engulfed in a rising river of degenerate filth, with the abandonment of virtue, righteousness, personal integrity, traditional marriage, and family life. Sodom and Gomorrah were the epitome of unholy life in the Old Testament. It was isolated then; now that condition is spread over the world. Satan skillfully manipulates the power of all types of media and communication. His success has greatly increased the extent and availability of such degrading and destructive influences worldwide. In the past, some effort was required to seek out such evil. Now it saturates significant portions of virtually every corner of the world. We cannot dry up the mounting river of evil influences, for they result from the exercise of moral agency divinely granted by our Father. But we can and must, with clarity, warn of the consequences of getting close to its enticing, destructive current.

Plan of happiness blesses all who live it

Now the brighter side. Despite pockets of evil, the world overall is majestically beautiful, filled with many good and sincere people. God has provided a way to live in this world and not be contaminated by the degrading pressures evil agents spread throughout it. You can live a vir-