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Elder D. Todd Christofferson

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The Atonement and the Resurrection

Elder D. Todd Christofferson

Elder D. Todd Christofferson is a member of the Presidency of the Seventy. This article is adapted from an address given at BYU on March 26, 2005.

I am honored to share a few thoughts on the Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. I have struggled, as many of you have, with a finite mind to comprehend that infinite sacrifice of the Savior. I do not pretend to be able to plumb the depths of the subject, but I hope I can offer an insight or two that will be helpful and encouraging to us as we think again on the great events of those few days that mean all the difference in our existence.

Imagining Ourselves There

In your mind, try to place yourselves back in time at that first Easter weekend. Today is Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. Here we are—the events of yesterday and the day before have made a tremendous impact upon us. It was Thursday evening when the Last Supper took place. Afterward, Jesus passed over the brook and into the Garden of Gethsemane and suffered there in a way that none of us have fully witnessed and certainly none comprehend. It was perhaps into the wee hours of yesterday morning that that continued. Yesterday, He was assaulted and abused by those in authority, both Jewish and Roman. He was condemned finally by Pilate and scourged. It has been less than twenty-four hours since we witnessed the awful scene of His crucifixion, as He hung there on the cross and suffered intensely again. It was a very, very dark time, and it has not been many hours ago. We hurriedly placed His body in the tomb before sunset yesterday. Now, here we are on this Sabbath. It is midday, and we are wondering, in doubt, and confused.

We had thought it was He who would rescue Israel. We had thought it was He who was the Messiah, and yet He is gone; He is dead.

Just before He died yesterday, He uttered these words: “It is finished” (John 19:30). What did He mean? Did He mean He had failed? He would never return? He is gone and it is over? Is there something more? Unbeknownst to you and me in this setting, in this Sabbath of doubt, He, His spirit, has been occupied elsewhere. This morning He entered the world of spirits. Future records will confirm that He was expected there.

[There were assembled a multitude of the righteous] awaiting the advent of the Son of God into the spirit world [just this morning], to declare their redemption from the bands of death.

Their sleeping dust was to be restored unto its perfect frame, bone to his bone, and the sinews and the flesh upon them, the spirit and the body to be united never again to be divided, that they might receive a fulness of joy.

While this vast multitude waited and conversed, rejoicing in the hour of their deliverance . . . , the Son of God appeared, declaring liberty to the captives who had been faithful;

And there he preached to them the everlasting gospel, the doctrine of the resurrection and the redemption of mankind from the fall, and from individual sins on conditions of repentance. (D&C 138:16–19)

That is what He has been doing this morning. And in the language of President Joseph F. Smith, “He [has] organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness, even to all the spirits of men” (D&C 138:30). And thus will the gospel be preached to them that are dead. Now, what awaits tomorrow we do not know. But in good time, joy incomprehensible will come to us. Tomorrow morning, Mary and other women will be at the tomb. They will find it empty. Angels will declare that the Savior, not there, has risen. Peter and John will enter that tomb and find it empty. Later that morning, with the sun perhaps barely up, Jesus Himself will appear to Mary and speak to her, the first mortal ever to see the resurrected Lord. He will show Himself to other women and to Peter individually. He will be with two of you on the road to Emmaus and then, toward evening, show Himself to His Apostles and perhaps some of us, gathered together, wondering and pondering over the marvelous witness of those who saw Him earlier. That is what awaits us tomorrow, and it is glorious to contemplate.

Jesus's Submission to the Father

I wonder if we appreciate the expectations that devolve upon us because of what He has done and what He now offers to us. In perhaps the earliest reference to Him and His role in our lives, this is the comment from God to Moses: “But, behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:2).

In one simple sentence, I believe the Savior revealed what was and always has been His overriding purpose and His motivation. His purpose is to do the will of the Father, and His motivation is to glorify the Father. I believe it required all of that devotion, the full measure of His devotion to doing the will of the Father and the motive of glorifying the Father, for Him to be able to endure what He had to endure and see the Atonement through to its conclusion.

The accounts of His suffering found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, speaking of Gethsemane, emphasize how much He endured. (It has interested me that there is no account of Gethsemane in John, at least in what we have of John. I wonder if it was something he felt too sacred to touch or just too tender to recount.) At least three times, it appears, He pled with the Father that He might not have to drink the bitter cup. In Matthew, the account is as follows:

He went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.

And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour?

Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.

And he came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy.

And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. (Matthew 26:39–44)

This really is all we have (repeated in a varied form in Mark and Luke) of that prayer. I am sure there was much more. But that was the most compelling, saying essentially: “Father, if it be possible, take this cup from me. If there is any way that this can be accomplished short of my having to drink it, that is what I plead with thee to do. Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done.”

Luke records that because of His agony, “His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). The Savior Himself, when He described it to the Prophet Joseph Smith, said it was not sweat but, in fact, blood, that He bled from every pore (see D&C 19:18). Luke records that an angel came to strengthen Him in that ordeal (see Luke 22:43). And later as that suffering resumed on the cross, it seemed compounded as the Father withdrew His Spirit so that the Son might tread the winepress alone. “And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

Always, however, in all of this agony and all of this pleading for relief, was His submission to the Father’s will—“Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matthew 26:39). “Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done” (Matthew 26:42). As He described the Atonement and the concern that He not shrink and fail fully to drain that bitter cup, He expressed once again the overriding motivation that saw Him through that incomprehensible suffering: “*Nevertheless, glory be to the Father*, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men” (D&C 19:19; emphasis added).

Had Jesus not devoted Himself to the Father and to the Father’s will, throughout His life and throughout His existence prior to this life, He might not have been able to see the Atonement through to its conclusion. As He expressed it in John: “When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things. And He that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him” (John 8:28–29).

In the Book of Mormon, He stated: “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 11:10–11).

Later, in that same book of 3 Nephi: “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” (3 Nephi 27:13). And Abinadi’s unforgettable words: “Yea, even so he shall be led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7).

Offering Our Own Sacrifice

I believe that we, in order to hold on our way, to persevere and endure to the end, to reap the full benefits of His Atonement, must similarly devote ourselves to the will and glory of the Father and the Son. Is it not logical that you and I, to be able to receive what He offers, would have to do as He did and make our greatest ambition to do the will of God and our greatest desire to glorify Him?

I read earlier some verses from section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants, referring to the Savior's advent in the spirit world before the Resurrection. There is an interesting description given there of the body of righteous people who were awaiting that advent. Here is how they were described: "There were gathered together in one place an innumerable company of the spirits of the just, who had been faithful in the testimony of Jesus while they lived in mortality; and who had offered sacrifice in the similitude of the great sacrifice of the Son of God, and had suffered tribulation in their Redeemer's name. All these had departed the mortal life, firm in the hope of a glorious resurrection, through the grace of God the Father and his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ" (D&C 138:12–14).

What interests me particularly there is that phrase "who had offered sacrifice in the similitude of the great sacrifice of the Son of God." They had not offered an equivalent sacrifice but something in the similitude, of the same nature. And because of that, they were firm in the hope of a glorious or celestial resurrection. What would be an offering in the similitude of the great offering of the Son of God?

We have the familiar statement given to Adam: "And after many days an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam, saying: Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord? And Adam said unto him: I know not, save the Lord commanded me. And then the angel spake, saying: *This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth.* Wherefore, thou shalt do all that thou doest in the name of the Son, and thou shalt repent and call upon God in the name of the Son forevermore" (Moses 5:6–8; emphasis added).

We know that when He appeared in this hemisphere, following His resurrection and ascension, He ended that kind of sacrifice in the similitude of the Only Begotten—that is, the animal sacrifice. But He reemphasized one aspect of the commandment to Adam—"Thou shalt repent and call upon God in the name of the Son forevermore"—when He later said, "Ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And

whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost” (3 Nephi 9:20). It is, then, our sacrifice in the similitude of His that, with broken heart and contrite spirit, we would submit ourselves entirely to God.

As it says in section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants: “Wherefore, the Almighty God gave his Only Begotten Son, as it is written in those scriptures which have been given of him. He suffered temptations but gave no heed unto them. He was crucified, died, and rose again the third day; and ascended into heaven, to sit down on the right hand of the Father, to reign with almighty power according to the will of the Father. [For what purpose?] That as many as would believe and be baptized in his holy name, and endure . . . to the end, should be saved” (D&C 20:21–25).

That is our sacrifice in the similitude of His, being baptized in His holy name and enduring to the end. May I remind you of two familiar verses from a sacramental hymn, “God Loved Us, So He Sent His Son.”

God loved us, so he sent his Son,
Christ Jesus, the atoning One,
To show us by the path he trod
The one and only way to God.

And then the fourth verse that we rarely sing:

In word and deed he doth require
My will to his, like son to sire,
Be made to bend, and I, as son,
Learn conduct from the Holy One.¹

Learning to Submit to God

That learning—that submission to Him and to His will that would permit us to reap the benefit of the Atonement—may involve a number of things. The one revelation recorded in the canon of scripture that was given to Brigham Young includes this verse: “My people must be tried in all things, that they may be prepared to receive the glory that I have for them, even the glory of Zion; and he that will not bear chastisement is not worthy of my kingdom” (D&C 136:31).

Early in my tenure as a Seventy, I was companion to Elder Russell M. Nelson in a stake conference. We had a wonderful experience together, and as we finished and were driving home, I said to him, “Elder Nelson, I hope if you ever see an error in me or some shortcoming, you would tell me about it.” He replied, “I will.” I was a little unnerved by his seeming anxiousness to comply with my request, but then He said,

“That is one of the ways we show our love for one another.” And I believe that is indeed a true principle.

The Savior said: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit” (John 15:1–2). What form the purging might take, what sacrifices it might entail for any of us, we probably will not know in advance. But if, with the rich young ruler, we ask, “What lack I yet?” (Matthew 19:20), the Savior’s answer would probably be the same, “Follow me” (Matthew 19:21)—or, in the language of King Benjamin, “[Become] as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:19). Here is another way of stating it: “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me [and this addition from the Joseph Smith Translation]. And now for a man to take up his cross, is to deny himself all ungodliness, and every worldly lust, and keep my commandments” (Matthew 16:24; Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 16:26).

We must be able to say, with Job, that our submission to Jesus, to His will, is so complete that “though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 13:15). I think this is perfectly described in poetic form in the hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” by Isaac Watts.

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ, my God.
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See, from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown.

Were the whole world of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.²

Indeed, the Atonement does deserve our all. Although we may not immediately attain to the Savior’s perfect example of always doing

those things that please the Father and always living our lives in a way to glorify Him, we can progress as the Savior Himself did, from grace to grace, until we obtain a fulness. “I, John, bear record that I beheld his glory, as the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, . . . which came and dwelt in the flesh, and dwelt among us. And I, John, saw that he received not of the fulness at first, but received grace for grace; and he received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness; and thus he was called the Son of God, because he received not of the fulness at the first” (D&C 93:11–14).

A few years back in general conference, I quoted this reassuring statement from President Brigham Young, who seemed to understand the challenge we face:

After all that has been said and done, after he has led this people so long, do you not perceive that there is a lack of confidence in our God? Can you perceive it in yourselves? You may ask, “[Brother] Brigham, do you perceive it in yourself?” I do, I can see that I yet lack confidence, to some extent, in him whom I trust.—Why? Because I have not the power, in consequence of that which the fall has brought upon me. . . .

Something rises up within me, at times[,] that . . . draws a dividing line between my interest and the interest of my Father in heaven; something that makes my interest and the interest of my Father in heaven not precisely one. . . .

We should feel and understand, as far as possible, as far as fallen nature will let us, as far as we can get faith and knowledge to understand ourselves, that the interest of that God whom we serve is our interest, and that we have no other, neither in time nor in eternity.³

Testifying of the Atonement’s Fruits

With you, I bear witness of the fruits of that great Atonement. To me, they come under three headings.

Forgiveness. The first is forgiveness or, as we sometimes say, justification. “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 27:16).

“Behold I say unto you, that whosoever has heard the words of the prophets, yea, all the holy prophets who have prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord—I say unto you, that all those who have hearkened unto their words, and believed that the Lord would redeem his people, and have looked forward to that day for a remission of their

sins, I say unto you, that these are his seed, . . . the heirs of the kingdom of God” (Mosiah 15:11).

And this witness from section 20: “We know that justification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true” (D&C 20:30).

Sanctification. A second fruit is the cleansing or, as we sometimes say, sanctification that comes through His grace. “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).

In Moroni, we read: “Again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot” (Moroni 10:33).

And again, from section 20, a testimony: “We know also, that sanctification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true, to all those who love and serve God with all their mights, minds, and strength” (D&C 20:31).

Resurrection. The third glorious fruit of the Atonement is the Resurrection itself, which comes because He atoned for Adam’s transgression. “The Lord said unto Adam: Behold I have forgiven thee thy transgression in the Garden of Eden. Hence came the saying abroad among the people, that the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt, wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children, for they are whole from the foundation of the world” (Moses 6:53).

In section 88, we learn: “Now, verily I say unto you, that through the redemption which is made for you is brought to pass the resurrection from the dead. And the spirit and the body are the soul of man. And the resurrection from the dead is the redemption of the soul” (D&C 88:14–16).

Regarding the Resurrection, we read: “They who are of a celestial spirit shall receive the same body which was a natural body; even ye shall receive your bodies, and your glory shall be that glory by which your bodies are quickened. Ye who are quickened by a portion of the celestial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness” (D&C 88:28–29).

The power of the Atonement to pardon, to sanctify, to give new life, even eternal and immortal life, came to me in a simple but powerful

experience some years ago. Again, it is one of many witnesses. On this occasion, I had been assigned by the First Presidency to interview a woman for the possible restoration of her temple blessings. She had committed some grievous transgressions, had been excommunicated and then baptized again, and now had applied for the privilege of returning to the temple. That required this interview and the ordinance of laying on of hands to restore those blessings and rights to her. As I prepared for that interview and read the summary of what had happened in her life, I was astonished. I could not believe that there could be so much of the sordid and evil in one life. As I read, I asked myself, *How could the First Presidency ever suppose that this person would again qualify to enter the house of the Lord?* When she came into the room to be interviewed, she seemed to have a glow about her, a light within. As we spoke, there came upon me a sense that she was pure—perhaps one of the purest souls I had ever met. I looked at her and I looked at the paper describing the past, and I could not believe it was the same woman. And in a real sense, she was a different person. The Atonement had transformed her. It gave me to understand, powerfully, the depth and breadth and scope of the atoning grace of Jesus Christ. He is real, and His grace is very real.

Conclusion

It is appropriate to consider the testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith as we conclude this reflection on the Atonement and Resurrection. Martyrdom endows a prophet's testimony with a special validity. The Greek root *martireo*, from which the English word *martyr* is derived, means "witness," or "to bear witness." The prophet Abinadi is described as having sealed the words, or the truth of his words, by his death (see Mosiah 17:20). Jesus's own death was a testament of His divinity and His mission. He is declared in Hebrews to be "the mediator of the new testament" (Hebrews 9:15), validated by His death, "for where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead" (Hebrews 9:16).

Like most of the Lord's anointed in ancient time, Joseph Smith sealed his mission and his works with his own blood. In a hail of bullets on the afternoon of June 27, 1844, in Carthage, Joseph and his brother Hyrum were cut down for the religion and the testimony they professed. And as the latter-day Apostles then announced: "The testators are now dead, and their testament is in force. . . . Their *innocent blood* on the banner of liberty, and on the *magna charta* of the United States, is an ambassador for the religion of Jesus Christ, that will touch

the hearts of honest men among all nations” (D&C 135:5, 7; emphasis in original).

The Savior has not had among mortals a more faithful witness, a more obedient disciple, a more loyal advocate than Joseph Smith.

I close with his great witness of the Savior, making it my own, joining it with yours:

We beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father, and received of his fulness;

And [we] saw the holy angels, and them who are sanctified before his throne, worshipping God, and the Lamb, who worship him forever and ever.

And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!

For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—

That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God. (D&C 76:20–24)

This is the most significant aspect of our entire existence. It is real. He is real. “He is not here, but is risen” (Luke 24:6). He lives. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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Notes

1. “God Loved Us, So He Sent His Son,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 187.
2. “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” *Westminster Choir College Library* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser, 1970).
3. Brigham Young, *Deseret News*, September 10, 1856, 212.