

# "Means unto Repentance": Unique Book of Mormon Insights into Christ's At-one-ment

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The most terrible human reality is that we sin, and the most crucial human problem is what to do about it. The most important claim of Christianity is that it offers a unique solution to that problem through the atonement of Christ. That claim has not, of course, been accepted by non-Christians; it remains, in the Apostle Paul's words, "unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1:23). And Christians themselves differ greatly in their understanding of *how* Christ's life, death, and resurrection can free them from sin.

The main reason for traditional Christian uncertainty is that, as one theologian has written, "There is not a single New Testament Doctrine of the Atonement. There is simply a collection of images and metaphors . . . from which subsequent tradition built its systematic doctrines and theories."<sup>1</sup> Those metaphors range from a captain gaining military victory over sin and death, to a judge and prisoners in a law court, to payment of ransom. From these metaphors have come quite different, even contradictory, doctrines among Christian believers.

But theories do not matter as much as the individual's experience of escaping from sin through faith in Christ. What actually takes place in that process is much richer than any theory in words about it. Despite having very different theories about the Atonement, many people have experienced it. But theories do matter to some extent—some can interfere with experiencing it, while more correct understandings can aid the experience. In this regard, the Book of Mormon, Another Testament of Jesus Christ, while it provides no single doctrine or metaphor of the Atonement, can give us the basis for a uniquely logical and persuasive explanation. I know from experience that this explanation of the Atonement is particularly helpful to people in our time.

One of the more popular Christian theories of the Atonement is the "satisfaction" theory: sin offends God's honor and justice; God cannot forgive sin without undermining his authority and the force of justice, so Christ's sacrifice paid or satisfied the debt to God's justice and honor. But this theory seems to make God less able to forgive than we are. We are able to forgive each other without conditions or satisfaction. Surely our omnipotent God can do the same.

Another popular theory gets around this problem but has problems of its own. The "moral-influence" theory denies the legalistic framework of having to satisfy the demands of God's justice; instead, it teaches that Christ's sacrifice exerts a moral influence on us by making us aware of our guilt and moving us to change our lives—we respond to the love he has shown for us by loving him and changing our lives to follow him. But this theory apparently removes the necessity of the Atonement. It makes Christ's influence "only" moral and not necessary for salvation, and the scriptures insist that it is necessary.

Many Christians and their churches have seen the fall of Adam as a great mistake that ruined God's plan and offended him. They have assumed that God was unhappy with humanity for what Adam did in Eden. This led to the idea that we must win back his love and favor. If we could not do that by our own actions, then it had to be by Christ's suffering, as a kind of gift that would please God. But the scriptures are clear that God did not reject us; rather, mankind rejected him. We do not need to win back God's love; he is always ready. Instead, we need to be reconciled to God (see 2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

English Christians back in the days when the Bible was first being translated into English seem to have understood this clearly. The word they used for reconciliation was *at-one-ment*, that is, to get back into a condition of oneness. In the sixteenth century, for example, the noted Bible translator William Tyndale even called Christ the “at-one-maker.” Only later, in response to changing theology, did a new verb, *atone*, develop, with a different pronunciation, and the meaning that *at-onement* once had gradually changed. The changed meaning and pronunciation continued to express the growing emphasis of theologians on Christ’s payment of a debt.

But there has been continuing uneasiness with this change. Modern translations of the New Testament do not use the word *atonement*. The word that was so translated in the King James version is regularly written *reconciliation*. One reason is because of what the modern meaning of *atonement* implies about the nature of God as one who demands payment. Another reason is that *atone* seems to remove Christ’s at-onement from our personal experience into a matter that only theologians claim fully to understand. Somehow it came to involve Adam and God (and perhaps the Devil), but not particularly you and me and our need for forgiveness and personal response to Christ.

The Book of Mormon, along with modern revelations, lays the groundwork for clearly understanding this matter. Its unique insights into the At-onement emphasize two concepts: (1) that the fall was not a mistake, and (2) that people were able to experience the At-onement *before* Christ died, in fact, that Adam and Eve became Christians.

According to Latter-day Saint readings of the scriptures, Adam’s and Eve’s actions in no way spoiled God’s plan but were, in fact, part of the plan. Their fall may even be thought of as part of the process of the At-onement. According to the book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price, after Eve and Adam have left the Garden and been taught by an angel about Christ, Eve exclaims, “Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient” (Moses 5:11). The two sinners repent and are baptized and recognize that they have been fully forgiven (see Moses 6:51-68). In this they become the model for all their descendants.

A Book of Mormon prophet explains the point in these words: “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:25-26).

These verses tell us that the process by which humans became separated from God and then can be brought back into his presence through the At-onement is not an accident. What Adam and Eve did was not against God’s plan but the very key to it. We learn that, by our nature as mortals, we had to leave the easy life in the Garden so that we could grow. Only by the hard experiences of life could we do that—reach the depths but also the heights of our soul’s capacity.

But why must we go through such a painful fall and rise, and how does it happen, even to those who lived before Christ’s mortal ministry? The Book of Mormon provides insights that answer those questions. But the answers are unlike the answers claimed by Christian thinkers in Joseph Smith’s day and since.

About six hundred years before Christ was born, Nephi was given a remarkable vision:

I looked and beheld the great city of Jerusalem, and also other cities. And I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin. . . . I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou? And I said unto him: a virgin most beautiful

and fair above all other virgins. And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God? And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things. And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh. . . . And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms. And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! (1 Nephi 11:13-21).

After the angel explained further, Nephi continued, “The angel said unto me again: Look and behold the condescension of God! And I looked and beheld the Redeemer of the world, of whom my father had spoken” (1 Nephi 11:26-27).

This vision of Jesus Christ’s mortal birth provides an important insight into the At-onement. One word given by Joseph Smith in his translation of Nephi’s account is crucial: *condescension*, which means, literally, “descending with.” Christ, we are told here, is God “descending with” us into all that we experience in mortality. This includes our separation from the Father and our suffering because of sin. It seems also to say that Christ’s coming down to be like and among us is because of his love for us. This love is the heart of the power of his at-onement.

Many years afterward, one of Nephi’s descendants, the prophet-king Benjamin, gathered his people together as he approached his death. His aim was to teach them a great revelation of understanding that had come to him. He reminded them vividly that they, and he, shared the human tendency to commit sin, “which doth cause him [the sinner] to shrink from the presence of the Lord, and doth fill his breast with guilt, and pain, and anguish, which is like an unquenchable fire, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever” (Mosiah 2:38). But Benjamin also gives them the solution by describing his vision of Christ’s birth, then 125 years in the future:

The time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay. . . . Lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people. And he shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning; and his mother shall be called Mary. And lo, he cometh unto his own, that salvation might come unto the children of men even through faith on his name (Mosiah 3:5, 7-9).

In all the scriptures known to us, this is the earliest point in time that we have a clear reference to that part of the At-onement directly connected to our individual sins: “Blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people.” This is not a description of what occurred on the cross but of what went on in the garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. That was the time when Christ suffered fully the fearful loneliness that comes to those who are separated from God. Through capabilities that only he had as the Son of God, Christ “descended” to the ultimate depth of human suffering for sin.

We begin to get clearer insight into what occurred in Gethsemane through a revelation given to Joseph Smith in 1830. It provides the most remarkable and moving description that we have of Christ’s experience of at-onement, because it is spoken, in first-person directness, by the Lord himself. We can feel, in some measure, his pain through these words:

I command you to repent—repent, lest . . . 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 – (Doctrine and Covenants 19:15-18).

My reading of these words indicates to me that the Lord broke off his sentence without completing it, shrinking even from the memory of the awful moment, as if remembering and reliving the pain were too great to bear even in A.D. 1830. That is, for me, the precise point where the central act of the At-onement occurs, where I am moved most fully to experience at-onement with Christ and rejoice with him as he then goes on to say, “Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and *finished my preparations* unto the children of men” (Doctrine and Covenants 19:19; italics added).

Of course we cannot understand all that happened in Gethsemane, especially *how* it happened. Yet we can feel the impact in our hearts of the love Jesus and his Father both expressed there—for each other and for us. Jesus Christ has created the greatest possibility we can imagine: that our common feelings of meaninglessness and separation from God can be removed, that we need not suffer if we would repent. The Father who planned our earth experience, who sent us here into risk and suffering only so we could further grow toward his likeness, has sent his Son to share the experience with us. He came down not only to guide and teach us through his revelations and his example, but also to experience willingly the full range of man’s living and dying, his joy and anguish. These were the “preparations” he had to finish to become completely and successfully our Savior.

This in itself is not a new idea. The New Testament hints at it. Paul taught, “For our sake he [the Father] made him [the Son] to be [that is, to see at first hand] sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21; Revised Standard Version).

In his Epistle to the Hebrews, Paul explained the idea more fully. Keep in mind that, in the following verses, “high priest” refers to a person ordained to intercede for us and to act on our behalf: “In all things it behoved him [Christ] to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted” (2:17-18). In other words, “we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (4:15). Paul explained the reason Christ had to descend below all things: “Though he were a Son [of God], yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him” (5:8-9).

But the Book of Mormon is plainer, especially in a vision of the future Christ that the prophet Alma received about 83 B.C.: “He shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; . . . he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people. . . . He will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11-12).

The Book of Mormon here provides the clearest insight into how only Christ could perform the At-onement: though he is divine, he does not offer us a solution to the problems of separation from our God without knowing the pain himself. This unconditional love is given to us by the same person who gave us the law and who will eventually judge us. Therefore, it has the unique power—available from no other source—to release us from the barrier of our own guilt and give us the strength to repent.

This insight is repeated and developed further throughout the Book of Mormon. We see it in the account of what happened among King Benjamin’s people as soon as they grasped the meaning of what he had taught them about

sin and at-onement.

They all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually. And we, ourselves, also, through the infinite goodness of God, and the manifestations of his Spirit, have great views of that which is to come. . . . And it is the faith which we have had on the things which our king has spoken unto us that has brought us to this great knowledge, whereby we do rejoice with such exceedingly great joy. And we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days (Mosiah 5:2-5).

King Benjamin responds:

Ye have spoken the words that I desired . . . and now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name. . . . Under this head ye are made free, and there is no other head whereby ye can be made free. There is no other name given whereby salvation cometh; therefore, I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives (vv. 6-8).

A great and revealing thing occurred here—a truly Christian community was being formed *125 years before Christ actually lived*. Struck to the heart by the power of God’s love, these Nephites experienced a mighty change in their hearts that led them to covenant that they would be obedient to God.

Fifty years later, another prophet among these people, clearly influenced by the prophecies and experiences that had been part of his people’s history, again talked about Christ’s sacrifice and made clearer what had happened among Benjamin’s group:

It is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice, and then shall there be . . . a stop to the shedding of blood; then shall the law of Moses be fulfilled. . . . This is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal. And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance. . . . Only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption (Alma 34:13-16).

This prophet, Amulek, said that it is *knowledge* of Christ’s sacrifice that alone can penetrate the barrier in our natures keeping us from being at-one with God. This barrier seems to consist of our insisting on judgment and punishment, for ourselves as well as others. This is the force that has prevented us from overcoming our separation from God.

Here we must remind ourselves of an amazing contradiction in ourselves. When our sense of justice is stirred, it makes us aware of sin and of the fact that we must begin to repent, yet it also interferes with our attempts to repent. We feel that every action must suffer its consequences and that we must justify our actions to ourselves.

Since there is often a contradiction between our beliefs and our actions, we feel guilt and an unbearable division within ourselves.

The Book of Mormon alone gives us the insight that this division was created *by God himself*. It is part of his plan, for it requires that we consider good and evil and choose between them. Our growth comes by making the right choices. The Book of Mormon prophet Alma taught this clearly to his sinful son Corianton:

Repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment, which also was eternal as the life of the soul should be, affixed opposite to the plan of happiness, which was as eternal also as the life of the soul. Now, how could a man repent except he should sin? How could he sin if there was no law? How could there be a law save there was a punishment? Now, there was a punishment affixed, and a just law given, which brought remorse of conscience unto man (Alma 42:16-18).

This moral nature makes us want to improve our lives. But it also makes us insist that we pay the full penalty for our sin. But of course there is no way that we can fully do this.

However, Alma also taught his son Corianton another essential role God plays in the At-onement, besides giving us law and conscience. Alma taught that justice requires repentance, “for except it were for these conditions, mercy could not take effect except it should destroy the work of justice” (Alma 42:13). He described how this works:

Thus we see that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice; yea, the justice of God, which consigned them forever to be cut off from his presence. And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also (42:14-15).

So God does two things that at first glance look contradictory. He creates “remorse of conscience” by giving the law and judging us and by stirring us to judge ourselves, but he also brings about “the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice.” The contradiction is escaped because God also provides the solution. He “himself atoneth for the sins of the world.” This refers, of course, to Jesus Christ, the Son, who willingly came to earth to provide a way for us to escape justice if we would have faith in him and repent. If we respond to Christ’s at-onement, it becomes possible for us to personally experience both separation and reconciliation. This opens to us the full meaning of both evil and good. It brings us to a condition of meekness and lowliness of heart whereby we can freely accept from God the power to be a god.

This love from the Father and the Son is unconditional. As Paul expressed it, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Christ’s love was not conditional upon our actions or our qualities. He expressed this love to us while we were yet in our sins. He did not complete the process of forgiveness, which depends upon our response; he *initiated* it in a free act of mercy. This love is quite independent from the notion of justice. It is entirely unmerited, unearned, unrelated to the worthiness of the object (except in that each person has intrinsic worth through our eternal existence and God-like potential).

The Book of Mormon helps us understand why this unique love that God extends to us can save us. God takes a risk on the possibility that his love will stir in each of us the necessary response, repentance. His love, expressed in the At-onement, gets directly at that barrier in us, the God-given sense of justice Alma taught his son about. That barrier makes us unable to forgive ourselves. Because of that, we are unable to unconditionally love ourselves,

unable to respond positively to our own potential, unable to be at peace with ourselves. But he breaks down that barrier in suffering for our sins because of his love for us.

The demands of justice that Alma and Amulek are talking about, which must be overpowered, are at least in part from our own sense of eternal justice, especially our own demands on ourselves. These demands cause us to feel guilt and division within ourselves. They begin the process of repentance, but they cannot complete it. So the At-onement gives us an escape from the burden of sin that we are utterly incapable of escaping by any other means.

Thus the “moral influence” of Christ’s at-onement, understood properly, *is necessary* for salvation. Nothing else can fully motivate us to repent and nothing else can break down the barriers that prevent us from forgiving ourselves. There is no condition in which we can imagine God being unable to forgive. But what effect will the forgiveness have? Although the At-onement is necessary, it is not enough. Forgiveness is meaningless unless it leads to repentance. Forgiveness must be accepted by free agents to be effective. We must respond to the At-onement and complete the process.

The Book of Mormon teaches that the At-onement is reconciliation as much as payment or satisfaction of justice. We may try to repent so that God will forgive us and atone for our sins; yet the power to repent comes ultimately from recognizing that God freely atones for our sins and begins the process of forgiveness by extending unconditional love to us. He does this in order that we might repent and thus bring to conclusion the process of forgiveness. God’s forgiveness is at least as much a freely given power to help us repent as it is a subsequent reward for repenting.

The center of our experience of the At-onement is Christ’s love breaking through the barrier of justice within us. That experience comes to us only through our knowledge of his love and suffering and through the gospel ordinances that remind us of that At-onement and recommit us to respond with repentance and obedience. The process is a complex one. Particular events may trigger it, and it may have climaxes, but essentially it is a lifelong process.

When I began serving as a missionary, I had not yet experienced the At-onement in a decisive personal way. While I was serving in Hawaii, I faced the most difficult spiritual challenge of my life to that point. A man we were teaching had come to believe the gospel was true, but he couldn’t find the strength to repent. He would make promises to change his habits, behavior, and feelings that were very harmful to himself and his family, but he would break his promises and then suffer terribly from guilt. He felt ashamed, not good enough for Christ, and too weak to become good.

We tried all kinds of ways to help him be strong. We told him about the hell he was making for himself and about the heaven with his family he was destroying. We made hourly calls to check up on him. We went over and over the logical “steps” of repentance. Nothing worked. His family members, who had already joined the Church, and we missionaries were all near despair.

Then I remembered Joseph Smith’s statement that the Book of Mormon was “the most correct book” in the world and that its principles provided the best way to get near to God.<sup>2</sup> I studied it looking for ways to help our friend. As I did, I went back over my notes from religion classes, which I remembered had stressed the new vision of salvation through the means unto repentance provided by Christ’s at-onement as explained in the Book of Mormon.

Slowly I found again the key I had been taught earlier, but which had not meant enough until now when it was needed so badly. We read the main passages about Christ from the Book of Mormon with our friend, and he came to feel the spirit of complete love his Savior had for him. I remember when we came to the sermon of Amulek, in Alma 34, where he taught that the suffering of Christ brings about the bowels of mercy, enough to break through the bands of justice and give us the means to have enough faith to repent.

This was exactly what our friend needed—to see clearly that there was a source for the power he needed. As he read the Book of Mormon passages, he finally understood and felt that power and thus was able to accept Christ's love and repent. Those around him helped the process, but the turning point was when he felt love from Christ, conveyed by the promises and spirit of the Book of Mormon. He said, "If Christ can have this kind of love for me, who am I to refuse to accept it—and to accept myself." With this new strength, he became a new person, almost overnight.

My own life didn't change as much right then, but I saw clearly that the Book of Mormon had, for me and for my friend, the best answer to the chief human question, "What can we do about our sins?" I became convinced that it also contained the best direct help to actually bring people to repent. My experience since then has increasingly vindicated those convictions about the unique insights of the Book of Mormon into the process and power of the At-onement.

### Footnotes

1. William J. Wolf, "The Atonement," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 16 vols, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 1496.
2. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 194.