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The Healing Power of the Atonement

Quinn Gardner*

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I’d like to read a verse from the 88th section of the Doctrine and Covenants because I feel this way this morning. It’s a salutre that is to be given at the School of the Prophets (and nobody but a bunch of crazy Mormons would get together Friday morning at seven o’clock for a devotional before breakfast!). And it reads: “I salute you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, in token or remembrance of the everlasting covenant, in which covenant I receive you to fellowship, in a determination that is fixed, immovable, and unchangeable, to be your friend and brother through the grace of God in the bonds of love, to walk in all the commandments of God blameless, in thanksgiving, forever and ever.” I think we all recognize that if I’m to say anything of any worth, it has to come from the Spirit. I think those of us associated with the helping professions and who are ministering to human service needs recognize that many people can discern a dismembered limb. It takes some training to diagnose a broken bone, perhaps even more training to diagnose a torn ligament. More training still perhaps to diagnose internal bleeding and perhaps the most training of all to diagnose a broken heart. And as it is not obvious to those who have not worked in this area that human hurt is very real but not terribly apparent, so also to the natural eye, the things of the Spirit are silly and ridiculous. I pray for a portion of that Spirit for both of us that what I have to say might be meaningful.

Let me give a paragraph of the thesis statement, if I may. Although I’d like to have all day to do this, I will try in forty minutes to establish the following: That the atonement is the center of the gospel; that forgiveness is at the center of the atonement; that all of you have paid the price to have your own witness. Without that witness, your ministry will fail of the power it has to offer. But with respect to the fact that the atonement is the center of the gospel, we have a very nice, clean, succinct statement of the Prophet Joseph in which he says that the center of the gospel is the life, the atonement, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and all other things are appendages thereto. So, we don’t have to spend very long on establishing that the atonement is just the heart of the entire gospel program. All of the foreshadowings of the Old Testament, all the prophecies of the prophets, all of creation bears witness of Jesus Christ. He comes. He ministers, He is crucified and resurrected. All of us should have a witness of that truth. Occasionally, I am disappointed when people say their testimonies are growing. I think it’s accurate that our faith in the Lord is growing, our confidence is increasing but we either have a witness or we don’t. We either have had witnesses or we have not. I hope that all of you, and I assume that all of you have paid the price to have your own witness, that all of your testimonies are growing. Without that witness, your ministry will fail of the power it takes to heal human lives.

Now with respect to the fact that forgiveness stands at the heart of the atonement, I think we have to start back early in the ministry of the Savior and I hope that you will forgive me for paraphrasing scriptures because there isn’t time to read them, but I think we see an interesting phenomenon in the way the Lord goes about encountering occasions on which to heal, then forgive people. And this gets him in a good deal of trouble with the local authorities. He finds a woman in sin and adroitly defuses all of the accusations and then says, “I accuse thee not; go thy way and sin no more.” We have a person who is lame and others who are blind and the Lord heals them, not just in body but in spirit. Many dramatic examples and then some not so dramatic. He forgives Zacchaeus for being short of stature and hated of men by saying,
Zacchaeus, come down from that tree and come and sup with me. I forgive you for being short and love you in spite of it." And when, just before the crucifixion, Martha is upset that Mary is not in there helping prepare the refreshments He says, "Now Martha, leave Mary alone. She is performing a very significant ordinance—one that is sacred. Forgive her for doing that and be happy in attending to the domestic chores."

And all the sweep of the Savior’s ministry is one involved in forgiving and healing and starting people anew; recreating the creature so that they are quickened in the inner man, in the inner woman. The effects of the spiritual fall are reversed, they’re brought back in touch with the powers of heaven and they can then lead their lives in harmony with the Spirit. Now of course, all of this culminates on the cross. The silence is the silence of forgiving all the way through this ill-begotten trial in which I believe it has been stated there were forty-seven instances in which the Jewish Fathers broke their own legal code, so bent were they on the destruction of their own king. His silence was not one of just indulgence, but of forgiveness. He makes arrangements for his mortal mother with John, and then of course, after suffering in the Garden, being nailed to the cross, in what has to be the greatest exhibition of forgiveness He says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And the King James translators have a difficult time. They can’t decide whether to go with the original or to translate it, so they give us both in the 27th chapter of Matthew and in the 46th verse.

And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabach-thani?" That is to say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?", the juxtaposition of His having forsaken His Father, and if they harden not their hearts, and stiffen not their necks against me, they shall be converted, and I will heal them." Now, I said to myself, "If the members of the First Quorum of the Twelve in this dispensation have not yet been healed, when they were called, maybe, just maybe, there’s room for me to make it on that chariot before it leaves." And we start to study and find that the powers of the atonement are very significant, that they are sent forth to work on us, and we’re wrought upon as it were, and we start to change. We see this change process take place many times in the Book of Mormon, many times in the personal lives and journals of Latter-day Saints in this dispensation and what it comes down to, is that finally, after avoiding it as long as possible, we give ourselves to the Lord, avoiding the implications of giving ourselves to Him just as long as we possibly can. But when we do, marvelous things happen. And as I understand it, this is the process of giving ourselves to the Lord. Now I would like to read something. It’s about three paragraphs but I think it bears at this point in establishing this thesis. It is by C. S. Lewis, from "Mere Christianity."

"Christ says, give me all. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work—I want you.

"I have not come to torment your natural self but to kill it. No half measures are any good. I don’t want to cut off a branch here nor a branch there; I want the whole tree down. I don’t want to drill the whole tooth, nor crown it nor stop it, but to have it out.

"Hand over the whole natural self. All the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked. The whole outfit. Give it to me and I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself. My own will shall become yours."

The terrible thing—the almost impossible thing—is to hand over your whole self, all your wishes and precautions to Christ. But it is far easier to do that than what we are trying to do instead of that. What we’re trying to do is to remain what we call "ourselves," to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life and yet at the same time be good. We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own ways, centered on money, or pleasure, or ambition and hoping in spite of this, to behave honestly, chastely and humbly. That is exactly what Christ warned us not to do. As he said, "A thistle cannot produce figs." If I am a field that contains nothing but grass seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it
short but I shall not produce wheat. Instead, I will produce grass. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. I must be plowed up and renewed. It is the difference between paint which merely is laid on the surface and a dye or a stain which soaks right through. He never talked vague, idealistic gas. When He said, “Be perfect,” He meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment. Yes it’s hard, but the sort of compromise we’re hankering after is even harder. In fact, it’s impossible. It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird. It would be jolliest well slightly harder for the bird to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present and we cannot go on indefinitely just being an ordinary, decent egg. We must hatch or we must go bad. Now, what does that have to do with the power that the Lord makes available for us to become healed? Well, my understanding is that he only releases that power in proportions; in direct proportions to which we give ourselves to Him. Now the interesting thing that all of you have learned, and you know much more about this than I do, is that it is very hard for us to give ourselves to the Lord until we have forgiven ourselves and forgiven others for the scars that we feel on our hearts. What does the Lord say if we have sought with our brother, you take care of that then bring your heart back here and put it on the altar because I want it pure. That is to say, I’ll make it pure but I want it whole when it comes. And I think this is the genius that every person working in the helping professions has to understand. We simply find ways to pry lose the scar tissue; to dig down into what is bugging, what is causing the dissonance, what is laying up scar tissues in our heart.

Now, let me read another quote from a non-member and I do this with some purpose: I think sometimes we Mormons flatter ourselves into thinking that because we understand we don’t have to live. I submit that there are those who are not, or at least not apparently of covenant Israel who understand some things better than we do and often live them better than we do. I hate to say it but from my years of experience, I would a lot rather do business with Gentiles than with Mormons. That is a sad statement, but as I stand before you today, I still feel that and it isn’t right. But here we have Brother Bonoffer who says this, and then I’d like to talk about this. ‘‘As Christ bears our burdens, so ought we bear the burdens of our fellowmen. The law of Christ which is our duty to fulfill is the bearing of the cross. My brother’s burden which I must bear is not only his outward loss, his natural characteristics and gifts, but quite literally his sins. And the only way to bear that sin is by forgiving it. And thereby, we share the power of Christ and the atonement. Thus, the call to follow Christ always means a call to share the work of forgiving other men of their sins.’’ Now, if my wife has hurt me, I am her burden. She, by order of the gospel, is supposed to come and ask my forgiveness. The same applies to any situation between any mortals. And yet, if I seek to be Christlike in my heart I should go to her and say, ‘‘I forgive you. I hold no ill will. I hold nothing.’’ Now can you imagine Brothers and Sisters what this world, what this Church, what this Association, what your family would be like if all of us were to walk around, put our arm around our brother, pull off our little name tag that’s sticking on both shoulders and say, ‘‘I want to lighten your burden. I’m going to forgive you for this. You may never know you did it or you may know full well that you did it with total premeditation and desire to hurt, but I am going to participate in the center of the gospel and I’m going to take my name off your back.’’ Where would the accusers be? Oh sure, there are some of us right now who can say, ‘‘Well, I’ve got a case and I’m going to wait until judgement day and I’m going to sit right in the back of the room and when my brother-in-law goes across the front of the stage I’m going to raise my hand and say, ‘‘Lord, just a minute now before we judge him. I have some accusations to make and I am justified in those and I will make them and I will have my justice.’’ And about the time we are making our way up to the podium to make our case before the Lord, someone grabs our pant leg and says, ‘‘Fella, you make your case against him and I’ve got a better one against you.’’ We turn around and we look and we remember. We say, ‘‘Lord, I’m going back to sit in my chair. Pardon me.’’ And the fingers let go of the pant leg and we say, ‘‘Thank you.’’ Now, I submit that each of us must be examples of doing this. When we do not forgive, when we do not exemplify and teach forgiveness, in my mind’s eye, we are denying the atonement. We are saying, it did not happen. I’m not saying that I agree with this, but there is a worldly philosopher who once put it forth and said something like this: ‘‘Lack of forgiveness may be a greater crime than murder. Why? Because murder could have been performed in the heat of anger and passion and then passed. But lack of forgiveness is consistent, thought through, meditated determination to maintain a wound as an open sore.’’ In some sense I suppose that is crucifying the Lord afresh.

What does it mean to carry the cross? What does it mean to bear one another’s burdens? I think that it can be sufficiently established, that among other things, it means to forgive; to forgive openly, totally, wholly, quickly, earnestly and sincerely, without wax. Now what happens when we are able to forgive ourselves and we are able to forgive others and we approach the Lord to ask Him to heal us? Well, a number of things. First, it is the order of the Kingdom that is established by the Savior, for some infractions that a common judge be a part, not of forgiving but of establishing us righteously in the kingdom. Now, since I have been in this assignment of Welfare Services, I have come to learn why the Lord has bishops—strong bishops as well as weak bishops, good bishops as well as bad bishops. He has established an office in the Priesthood, not just a calling. Bishops are set apart and ordained, not just called and set apart like an elder’s quorum president or a stake president. And that is so that they might have the special endowment to discern and judge cases. Judge repentance, judge need, judge spirit, judge spiritual gifts. Now you know, it’s occasionally hard on me and I’m sure it’s occasionally hard on you to watch a bishop make a mistake. It is sometimes hard on you and sometimes
hard on me to watch a bishop who is not sensitive. I don’t say that he has to be trained but I hope that he has to be sensitive and in his insensitivity leaves a homosexual feeling that we don’t really want him. That hurts. But I have sufficient faith in the system and in the Lord that by and large, our courts are courts of compassion. Our bishops are men of compassion and in spite of themselves they are inspired. And so, we must practice in congruence with what is their role and after they have accomplished their role and purpose, if it was necessary, then the Savior is ready to send the powers of the atonement into people’s lives, and He gives them the power that will heal them and make them whole.

Now I would like to spend just a minute or two on this power concept. I believe that it is not too far in the distant future when the inhabitants of Zion are going to have to quit living below their privileges and lay hold on the powers of the gospel for it is only those that will be able to ward off Satan, who has very clearly extended his reign and has raised the stakes and has lifted the level on which his battle is fought. I want to read two scriptures in juxtaposition to each other to establish something. It is in the 29th section of the Doctrine & Covenants, verse 29, when speaking about repentance, the Lord has this to say. Let me start with verse 27. “And the righteous shall be gathered on my right hand unto eternal life; and the wicked on my left hand will I be ashamed to own before the Father; Wherefore I will say unto them - Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the Devil and his angels.” Now listen to this--very significant. “And now behold I say unto you, never at any time have I declared from mine own mouth that they should return, for where I am they cannot come.” Now why? Not because he doesn’t want to forgive them, not because he doesn’t want to love them but for this reason--“For they have no power.”

Now set that in opposition to this verse in the 132nd section of the Doctrine & Covenants. In the 20th verse, section 132, the Lord is defining what constitutes a God and He says this, “Then shall they be Gods because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue, then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them.”

One of the most significant things that you and I do in this life is to receive the ordinances of the temple, administered through the endowment. Most of you have received this endowment. Think in your minds for a minute of the very last thing you ask for as you pass through the veil and how it relates to gospel power. Then think, what was it that the Savior told the boy Prophet when he appeared to him in the Sacred Grove.7 He said that they drew near to him with their lips but their hearts were far from him; having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof. And then think how Paul defined the gospel. He did not say it is the ethics of God and salvation, it is the knowledge of God and salvation, it is the laws and ordinances of God and salvation, it is all of the above. The power of God unto salvation.

Now, we come to the final element in this thesis. That is, if you and I want to do any good in this world, we have to lay hold on the powers of the Spirit. No one else does good, says the Savior, except those who are like branches are to the vine. “I am the vine and those who are not attached thereto wither and die.” Now how is this power given to us? Well, in section 121, we are told this, those of us who are priesthood bearers (and I have something to say to the sisters on this too if time will permit). This very simple verse we’ve read a hundred times in the Doctrine & Covenants, section 121, verse 36. “The rights of the Priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and the powers of heaven cannot be controlled or handled only upon the principles of righteousness.” I believe that our most important attribute in order to serve in the helping professions, regardless of the way in which we minister, whether we are with the LDS Social Services or whether we teach or whether we are with the State or with a private group or whether we just do it as a volunteer or on whatever basis we do it, after all is said and done, the power of our ministry, the work, the amount of our accomplishment will be in direct proportion to our righteousness. For it is righteousness that calls down the powers of heaven, and it is the power of heaven that does the healing, and it is the healing that does the saving. And that is what we’re after. Now, there is an interesting phenomenon that seems to be. I suppose it’s been around for a long time and maybe it’s just a good solid sign of age, but the older I get, the more I realize that most of us want to do things without having laid the foundation to do it. One of the general authorities stole my secretary about three weeks ago, Lord love him for it, I forgive him totally, and I had to hire a new secretary and as I started to interview, low and behold, bless their souls, and I forgive them totally for it, the Personnel Department sent me down a secretary that couldn’t even spell. And every time, I find that we have not prepared ourselves to serve. Now something very interesting here--in Jacob 5, this great parable, we have kind of the zenith of the story set before us in the 47th verse. You remember the Lord has had a very difficult time with his vineyard. He’s moved the workers and done everything he knows how to bring forth much fruit from the vineyard. And here we find him rather disturbed. Disgusted. Verse 47, speaking to his servant, a wonderfully patient, faithful servant and he says this, “But what could I have done more in my vineyard? Have I slackened my hand that I have not nourished it? Nay, I have nourished it, I have digged about it, I have pruned it, I have dugged it; and I have stretched forth my hand almost all the day long. . . .” Sounds like a parent doesn’t he? . . . “And the end draweth nigh. And it giveth me that I should hew down the trees of my vineyard, and cast them into the fires that they should be burned. Who is it that hath corrupted my vineyard?” He’s looking for an outward problem. Somebody has put bugs in there--it’s infested by some external force. Now here’s the servant who has been doing the bird-dogging, the leg work and all the grunt work down there in the trenches. Here’s his analysis of the situation: “And it came to pass that the servant said to his master: ‘Is it not the loftiness of thy vineyard and have not the branches thereof overcome the roots which are good? And because the branches have
overcome the roots thereof, behold they grew faster than the strength of the roots, taking strength unto themselves. Behold, I say, is not this the cause that the trees of thy vineyard have become corrupted? "Now Brothers and Sisters, I don't want to be too subtle. I believe that our challenge in this Church, in our families, in our homes, in our professions is to have congruence between our roots and our branches. If we seek to minister without our roots being deep, strong and powerful, centered in the Savior, receiving their strength, their nourishment and their life from the Savior, the branches of their ministry will be spindly, weak and largely their fruits unproductive. But if we will pay the price in discipline, in prayer, in hurt, in scripture study, in professional development and pain, then I believe that we will have the roots. The Lord will cause them to grow sufficiently that we will be able to be co-workers in this healing process and in the process of healing others we will find ourselves made whole. I believe the atonement is the center of the gospel and that forgiveness is the center of the atonement and that we would do well to participate in the atonement by forgiving others, by forgiving ourselves, and by giving ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ that he might sanctify us and make us pure and holy without spot. That the powers of the Spirit, the powers of the atonement may be released in our lives. That thereby, we enjoy the fruit of joy and contentment, of peace and harmony, the fruit of power in the ministry with others so that as co-workers we really assist the Savior in healing others. I believe that anyone in the helping professions must have their lives in order so that the powers of heaven, so closely allied with righteousness, can be released in their lives. I believe that our ministry must be congruent with the overall process set up by the author and creator of life, and by the size of our spirits and I believe that we must recognize that he is the center, he is the source, and we must give him credit for what is accomplished.

Now I would like to share a brief experience. bear my testimony and sit down. Last Friday morning the Presiding Bishopric. Brother Harold Brown, the director of LDS Social Services and myself met with the first presidency and made a recommendation relative to countering the very organized approach toward the legalizing, and forgive me, de-pathologizing of homosexuality. It is my personal belief that many of us were asleep at the switch when Satan launched his bid for abortion. I don't know that we can afford to be asleep at the switch when he now has raised his pitch on lesbianism and homosexuality. I want to affirm the Church position that this is learned behavior and it can be cured. That will not change. I want to affirm something even more important than that and I want to ask this group to help. We pled with the First Presidency to issue a statement and to organize our materials and see that bishops are trained so that these people will know that we love them and that we want them back in full fellowship. A great travesty has been worked on this part of the world in a very subtle and crafty way in which it has been stated that homosexuality is not curable. It is born, inbred; it comes with the genes, as it were. And because of that, many, very many people have decided not to try to come to the Savior to have anything changed or healed because they don't think it needs to be. And so, through his craftiness, Satan has blinded many therapists, many counselors, many homosexuals and lesbians. Those coming to us for help have been reduced dramatically in number in the last year since the publication of the so-called "pain letter." And I think that we need now to say two things. It is learned and it can be cured, A; and B, we love you; we want to work with you. Don't be turned off, for we forgive. Would you help in that cause as you can where you labor? Take up that cross and help carry it. And the second thing that I hope that all of you and particularly those of you who draw your sustenance from the stake or from the Church, don't forget the difference between your divine calling and your inspired calling. None of us will ever be released as fathers and mothers. We will be released as bishops, as high counselors, as Sunday School teachers. Those are the inspired callings. I plead with you as you counsel people to see if they understand the difference between divine and inspired callings and if their house is in order; that priority is placed on those divine callings. Because if our families are not secure, nothing else can be secure.

You are a wonderful group and I salute you. And I pray the Lord will bless you. Very few people know what you do. I don't practice your profession but I watch it. And as I have got to know President Kimball, very, very well in the last three years, I appreciate the fact that his greatness has come from the fact that all his life and all his days as an apostle he is one of the few brethren who would run back and forth between the Hotel Utah and his office. picking a drunkard up off the floor and putting him back on the bed and trying to get his attention, or a prostitute or a homosexual or anyone else with misery that the public at large had not yet come to appreciate as being very real. And I think that's what makes the greatness of Spencer Kimball. I think that's what makes the greatness of you people. I salute you. I wish I could say that I have spent time in healing individual lives as you have. But I haven't. I consider you greater than myself. I pray that the Lord will bless you as a very significant group of people whose ministry has not yet been appreciated but someday will be. Now I bear testimony that Jesus Christ lives. I know it. I know it in some very special ways and I know whereof I speak. He's the greatest single friend any person can have. Make him your friend. Make him the source of your life, the power in your life and be prepared to face the onslaught that is ahead. I don't think Mormons are going to be popular much longer in this world. And as we fight every form of human degradation, we will be less and less popular and only those who have that absolute faith are going to survive the storm. I know that Spencer W. Kimball is a prophet of God. I don't expect to meet a greater man this side of the veil. He is our example in the helping profession. I know this Church is true and it contains all the powers and rights to set up, establish and govern a kingdom that will fill the ends, lands and governments of the earth. I know that Joseph Smith was a prophet and that he is close; that he assists in the work of this dispensation still. I bear this testimony humbly, in the name of Jesus Christ. amen.