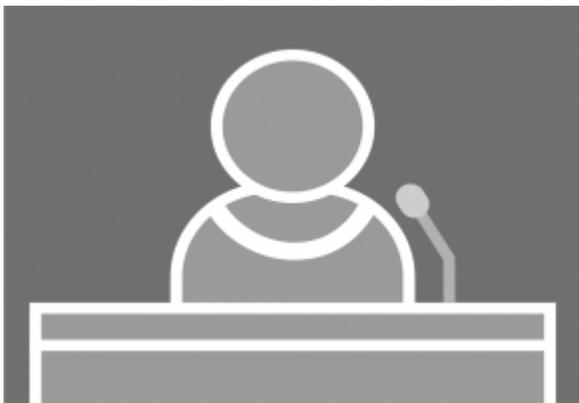


Grace, Mercy, Repentance and Spiritual Rebirth



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Each Sunday we commemorate the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ with the ordinance of the sacrament, and each day of our lives we remember Him in prayer, in thanks, and in the way we live. Today I invite you to join with me in directing our thoughts to Jesus, to remember His mission and what He has done for us. As King Benjamin taught, "There shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent" (Mosiah 3:17). On this occasion, I would like to share some thoughts with you about why we need a Savior, about how we can be saved only through His grace, mercy, and merits, and how we can become spiritually reborn through Him.

My message today is one of both bad news and good news. The bad news is that despite all our efforts and all our good works, we cannot save ourselves. We cannot save even a particle of ourselves.

The good news is that Christ is able to save us, and He is anxious for us to come to Him so He can apply His saving power in our behalf.

Our Need for a Savior

But do we really need a Savior? Consider the following scriptures, and ponder the importance of Jesus in your life:

Amulek taught: "All mankind must unavoidably perish; yea, all are hardened; yea, all are fallen and are lost, and must perish" (Alma 34:9).

On another occasion, Amulek said: "[God] shall not save his people in their sins... He cannot save them in their sins, [because] no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of heaven; . . . therefore, ye cannot be saved in your sins" (Alma 11:36-37).

And Jacob told his people: "Our spirits must become subject to that angel who fell from before the presence of the Eternal God, and became the devil, to rise no more. And our spirits must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God, and to remain with the father of lies, in misery, like unto himself" (2 Nephi 9:8-9).

These somber scriptures emphasize, in dramatic and unhappy language, that left to our own resources, we have no hope in a happy eternity. We don't even have hope for a happy here-and-now. These scriptures teach that on our own you and I are hardened, fallen and lost. We will perish, we cannot be saved, we cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven, we will be eternally subject to Satan, shut out from God's presence. And we will be miserable.

In short, our fallen nature and our sins combine to alienate us from God, that is, to separate us from our Heavenly Father, thereby making us unworthy and unable to return to His presence.

That is the bad news.

Brothers and Sisters, you and I cannot remedy our alienation from God, because no unclean thing can enter His presence. Unless we can find a means of becoming clean, we must remain forever estranged and forever unworthy to return to Him. Yet nothing we can do can overcome that alienation, because we don't have the capacity on our own to make ourselves clean. If we could, we would not need a Savior. But if we want to be cleansed and return to the presence of God, we can only do it through a power much greater than our own.

The Grace, Mercy, and Merits of Christ

Jesus Christ can do it for us. His Atonement is the only power that can truly make us clean and that can reconcile us with the Father.

Jacob said: "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God; . . . and remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved" (2 Nephi 10:24).

But what is grace ? Grace means service freely rendered. In a gospel context, grace is what Christ does for us that we cannot do for ourselves.

Similarly, mercy is kind or compassionate treatment of someone in one's power, and to merit means "to deserve," or to be worthy of something.

One of the important messages of the scriptures is that we cannot merit, or deserve an inheritance in God's presence in the celestial kingdom. But Christ does, because His sinless life makes Him truly worthy. His great act of grace is that He desires to apply His worthiness to us, if we will but come unto him.

Lehi taught: "Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah... Behold he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit... Wherefore, how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah... He shall make intercession for all the children of men; and they that believe in him shall be saved" (2 Nephi 2:6-9).

Alma said: "Since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance, and so forth" (Alma 22:14; see also Alma 24:10; Moroni 6:4).

Nephi the son of Helaman taught his people: "And if ye believe on his name ye will repent of all your sins, that thereby ye may have a remission of them through his merits" (Helaman 14:13).

So what, then, is the source of our salvation? Is it our faith or our repentance? No. Though these are required of

us, it is the Atonement of Jesus Christ that saves us.

King Benjamin testified: "And now, in the first place, he hath created you, and granted unto you your lives, for which ye are indebted unto him. And secondly, he doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you; for which if ye do, he doth immediately bless you; and therefore he hath paid you. And ye are still indebted unto him, and are, and will be, forever and ever; therefore, of what have ye to boast?" (Mosiah 2:23-24).

Indeed, brothers and sisters, we will always be in Christ's debt, because - as all these scriptures teach - it is only through Christ's merits, and not our own, that we can be saved. We will for all eternity be "indebted unto him," as King Benjamin said, and we have nothing to boast of.

But we do have much to rejoice about. The gospel is indeed the good news.

Christ's grace, worthiness, and mercy do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We cannot and did not create ourselves, and we cannot and did not atone for our own sins. Moreover, the scriptures teach us that the payment for human sin had to be an infinite and eternal sacrifice by a perfect God (see Alma 34:10, 14). No human action, and no collective human action, could have met the requirements to make us clean and able to return to the presence of our Father.

But are there things that we must do to receive the grace, mercy, and merits of Christ? Yes. The verses that we have read tell us that there are things that are required of us:

We must reconcile ourselves to the will of God, which means that we must set aside our own proud desires and place our thoughts and our intentions in harmony with His.

We must have a broken heart and a contrite spirit.

We must exercise faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

We must repent of our sins, which means not only to confess them but also to forsake them.

We must be baptized by immersion for the remission of sins, in similitude of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection and in similitude of the death of our own "natural man" and our spiritual rebirth as new persons in Christ.

And we must receive the Holy Ghost, which means that we must live worthy to have the companionship of the Spirit in our lives.

Repentance

Susan had engaged in inappropriate behavior and came to meet with Bishop Jones. When Bishop Jones asked Susan if she had ever committed the same transgression before, she informed him that she had done it two months earlier, but she had "taken care of it" with the previous bishop. Bishop Jones was intrigued. When he asked her if she had done it before that, she said Yes, she had done it a few months before that, but she had "taken care of it" with the bishop in her previous ward. Off and on she had transgressed during high school, but she had always "taken care of it" with her bishop. Sometimes people visit the bishop's office and tell him that they want to "clear things up."

I have searched the scriptures and have observed that the phrase "to clear up" is not found in the standard works in the context of repentance. And the phrase "to take care of" is used with respect to oxen and sheep. Rather than trying to "take care of" something or trying to "clear it up," what we need to do is repent, which is something dramatically different from "taking care of" something or "clearing something up." To repent means to change one's heart, to change one's attitude, to change one's life. The scriptural definition of repentance

includes both confessing and forsaking: "By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins - behold, he will confess them and forsake them" (D&C 58:43).

Once a man boasted to his new bishop that he always goes to his bishop immediately after he commits sin. But for him, talking with his bishop was not true repentance but a substitute for repentance. Maybe it was even a planned strategy. People who repent do not return to the sin again and again. Indeed, to forsake something is to turn away from it forever, to turn one's back on it, to abandon it, to make it no longer part of one's life. All of this takes a great deal of effort and a very long time. You cannot expect your life to be transformed overnight, and to repent means to transform your life. It will take time.

People who undergo the process of repentance learn to trust the Lord and the bishop. A truly repentant person understands that it is the Lord's time-table that counts, not the sinner's. It is the Lord who will determine when you will be considered worthy again, and He will make His will known to the bishop.

Will it be worth it? Of course it will. There are certainly people in this hall now who have current temple recommends in their pockets who did not take the most direct route through life's challenges. But they can testify of the transforming power of the Atonement and of the power of repentance. They now feel free, which they never were until they truly repented. But their repentance took effort and time.

Back to the example of Susan, who "took care of it" with her previous two bishops. Bishop Jones never saw her again, though she lived in the ward for the next few months. Perhaps in her next ward she told a new bishop that she "took care of" something with Bishop Jones. But she did not. Some people make appointments to see their bishops in the final days before they move to new wards. Let me assure you that one-time confessions, especially in haste before moving on, do not "take care" of anything.

When you truly repent, all of your life will change. For example, no one can repent of any transgression without also becoming a full tithe payer and a consistent church attender. In the process of repenting of any particular misconduct, you will gain a strong desire and commitment to be worthy in all areas of your life. That is one way you will know that you are truly repenting, because to repent means to change your life.

When will you be able to say that you "took care of it" or "cleared it up" with your current bishop? When you have a new temple recommend with his signature on it, then you will know that you have "taken care of it" and "cleared it up." To achieve that goal, hard work may be required on your part, but it will be worth it. In the process, your character will change such that you will have a desire to do all things that the Lord wants you to do. I testify that this is true. I testify that if you do these things your hearts will change, your character will change, your desires will change, and your interests will change. You will become, as Alma taught, a new creature in Christ (see Mosiah 27:26).

Being Born Again

The process of changing your life is what the scriptures call being "born again," and it is a necessary part of our experience. Alma taught: "Now I say unto you that ye must repent, and be born again; for the Spirit saith if ye are not born again ye cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven" (Alma 7:14). Stated simply, to be born again is to repent of our sins and to live a new life of worthiness. It is to become dead with respect to our old ways that were patterned after the image of the world and to become alive to a new life patterned after the example of Jesus Christ. As we undergo this process and accept the ordinances of baptism and the laying on of hands - which symbolize and actualize spiritual rebirth - we become members of Jesus' covenant family and heirs with Him of the eternal life that He has earned through His worthiness and His atoning sacrifice.

Alma taught: "All mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; And thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God" (Mosiah 27:25-26).

To be spiritually reborn is not to have some dramatic spiritual manifestation, to be sealed up to eternal life, to become perfect, or to die and go to heaven. It is to undergo the change of heart that many of you have undergone in recent years, leaving behind the things of the world and seeking after things that are worthy, righteous, and uplifting - to live the gospel. Some examples of real people will illustrate how this process works.

Mark and Mary were in love, engaged to be married, and had set a wedding date at one of the temples. They were from every appearance an ideal young couple on their way to a celestial marriage and a happy life together. One evening, they confessed to their bishop that they had violated the law of chastity. The bishop, of course, had to inform them that they would not be getting married in the next few months as scheduled but would need to spend months in serious repentance. The bishop's goal was not to punish them but to help them change their hearts - a process that takes much patience and time. When the bishop asked Mark why they had sinned, Mark responded, "Because we love each other so much." That was the wrong answer.

Over the course of many months, Mark and Mary faithfully submitted themselves to the discipline of the Church and to the wise guiding counsel of their bishop. As they approached a new date, repentant and cleansed from sin through Christ's Atonement, the bishop asked Mark why they did not engage any more in the kind of behavior that had made them unworthy. Mark's answer was: "Because we love each other so much." This time it was the right answer. A spiritual transformation had taken place.

Annie grew up in the family of faithful Latter-day Saint parents. As a rebellious teenager, she made many wrong choices that drove the Holy Ghost out of her life. She failed at school, could not hold a job, and made herself and those around her miserable. Then she met Michael. Annie and Michael fell in love and decided to get married. Remembering the kind of Latter-day Saint home in which she was raised, Annie decided that she would do whatever was required to get her life in order so she could have that same kind of home for her herself, her husband, and her children.

At first Annie was disappointed and discouraged when the bishop told her how long it would take before she would be worthy of a temple marriage. Again, the bishop's goal was not to punish her for her sins but to guide her through the process of changing her heart. About a year after they became engaged, Annie and Michael were married in the temple. Annie is now a faithful young mother, serving actively in her ward. Her attitude toward the world changed, her desires changed, her life changed. Where once her countenance showed anger and hostility, it now reflects the love of her Savior. She was born again.

Spiritual rebirth is not an event, it is a process - a regenerating process that changes our nature and makes us new. It requires effort, patience, and considerable time.

When King Benjamin taught his people about the mission of Christ and challenged them to come to their Savior and embrace His gospel, they responded: "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 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).

Such is the disposition of those who have surrendered their will to that of their Heavenly Father, who truly have

been born again.

Trusting Jesus

Can we save ourselves? No. But the good news is that we don't need to. The great message of the gospel is that Jesus Christ has done the saving work, and He invites us to join Him in a covenant partnership so that His worthiness can be added to our repentance so we can be brought by Him into our Father's kingdom.

As King Benjamin taught: "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; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters. . . . 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. And it shall come to pass that whosoever doeth this shall be found at the right hand of God, for he shall know the name by which he is called; for he shall be called by the name of Christ" (Mosiah 5:7-9).

Sometimes, we see in the Church people who, recognizing their own shortcomings, fall into despair and sorrow. Certainly all of us have cause to repent, all of us need to change our ways and to do better. But sometimes we don't forgive ourselves for things that the Lord has already forgiven us for. And sometimes we even allow that lack of forgiveness to canker in our souls and to impede our progress. To do so is a sin.

Brothers and sisters, if things you have done wrong are making you unworthy to have the Holy Ghost in your life, I urge you to cast your burdens on the Lord through sincere confession and repentance. But if you have repented and made amends both to God and to His Church, I urge you to move on. If you allow past, repented, sins to weigh you down, are you not denying the power of the Atonement? Are you not saying to Jesus Christ, "You can't take away my sins" or "I won't let you take away my sins"?

Even worse, if you are refusing the Savior's gentle invitation to repent, are you not saying to Jesus, "I have no need of you; though you have suffered and died for my sins, I'm not interested in what you have to offer me"?

Intercession

To intercede means to plead or petition in behalf of another, to mediate between parties in a dispute.

Jesus Christ is our Intercessor and our Advocate. Do you not want Him to be your defense attorney, to stand up for you and to plead your case in the supreme court of heaven?

Here is what Jesus has to say: "Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him - Saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified; Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life" (D&C 453-5).

"Tis Sweet to Sing the Matchless Love (Hymn 176)

"Tis sweet to sing the matchless love of Him who left his home above
And came to earth - oh, wondrous plan - suffer, bleed, and die for man!
For Jesus died on Calvary, that all thru him might ransomed be.
Then sing hosannas to his name; let heav'n and earth his love proclaim.

There Is a Green Hill Far Away (Hymn 194)

There is a green hill far away, without a city wall,
Where the dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all.
We may not know, we cannot tell, what pains he had to bear,
But we believe it was for us he hung and suffered there.
There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.
He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in.
Oh, dearly, dearly has he loved! And we must love him too,
And trust in his redeeming blood, and try his works to do.

Sing Praise to Him (Hymn 70)

Sing praise to him who reigns above, The Lord of all creation,
The source of pow'r, the fount of love, The rock of our salvation.
With healing balm my soul he fills and ev'ry faithless murmur stills.
To him all praise and glory!
The Lord is never far away, But, thru all grief distressing,
An ever-present help and stay, Our peace and joy and blessing.
As with a mother's tender hand, He leads his own, his chosen band.
To him all praise and glory!
Thus, all my toilsome way along, I sing aloud thy praises,
That men may hear the grateful song my voice unwearied raises.
Be joyful in the Lord, my heart! Both soul and body bear your part.
To him all praise and glory!

One final word is in order. In this talk I have quoted, paraphrased, or cited nineteen passages of scripture. Seventeen of those are from the Book of Mormon, and the other two are from the Doctrine and Covenants. In our praising of the Lord for what He has done for us, let us always thank Him for the scriptures that were revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith, particularly for the Book of Mormon. Better than any other book in the world, it is a testament of the atoning work of our Savior Jesus Christ. As you face life's challenges, overcome transgression, and strive to become spiritually reborn, I counsel you to make reading the Book of Mormon an important part of your life.

I testify that God lives and that Jesus Christ is our Savior. May we invite the power of His Atonement into our lives to cleanse us and to change our hearts. And may we eagerly accept His gift of redemption, which is so freely given.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.