

The Atonement and the Journey of Mortality

David A. Bednar Ensign April 2012

The grand objective of the Savior's gospel was summarized succinctly by President David O. McKay (1873–1970): “The purpose of the gospel is . . . to make bad men good and good men better, and to change human nature.”¹ Thus, the journey of mortality is to progress from bad to good to better and to experience the mighty change of heart—to have our fallen natures changed (see Mosiah 5:2).

The Book of Mormon is our handbook of instructions as we travel the pathway from bad to good to better and strive to have our hearts changed. King Benjamin teaches about the journey of mortality and the role of the Atonement in navigating successfully that journey: “For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, *and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint* through the atonement of Christ the Lord” (Mosiah 3:19; emphasis added).

I draw your attention to two specific phrases. First—“putteth off the natural man.” The journey from bad to good is the process of putting off the natural man or the natural woman in each of us. In mortality we all are tempted by the flesh. The very elements out of which our bodies were created are by nature fallen and ever subject to the pull of sin, corruption, and death. But we can increase our capacity to overcome the desires of the flesh and temptations “through the atonement of Christ.” When we make mistakes, as we transgress and sin, we can repent and become clean through the redeeming power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Second—“becometh a saint.” This phrase describes the continuation and second phase of life's journey to make “good men better” or, in other words, to become more like a saint. This second part of the journey, this process of going from good to better, is a topic about which we do not study or teach frequently enough nor understand adequately.

I suspect that many Church members are much more familiar with the nature of the redeeming and cleansing power of the Atonement than they are with the strengthening and enabling power. It is one thing to know that Jesus Christ came to earth to *die* for us—that is fundamental and foundational to the doctrine of Christ. But we also need to appreciate that the Lord desires, through His Atonement and by the power of the Holy Ghost, to *live* in us—not only to direct us but also to empower us.

Most of us know that when we do wrong things, we need help to overcome the effects of sin in our lives. The Savior has paid the price and made it possible for us to become clean through His redeeming power. Most of us clearly understand that the Atonement is for sinners. I am not so sure, however, that we know and understand that the Atonement is also for saints—for good men and women who are obedient, worthy, and conscientious and who are striving to become better and serve more faithfully. We may mistakenly believe we must make the journey from good to better and become a saint all by ourselves, through sheer grit, willpower, and discipline, and with our obviously limited capacities.

The gospel of the Savior is not simply about avoiding bad in our lives; it also is essentially about doing and becoming good. And the Atonement provides help for us to overcome and avoid bad and to do and become good. Help from the Savior is available for the entire journey of mortality—from bad to good to better and to change our very nature.

I am not suggesting that the redeeming and enabling powers of the Atonement are separate and discrete. Rather, these two dimensions of the Atonement are connected and complementary; they both need to be operational during all phases of the journey of life. And it is eternally important for all of us to recognize that *both* of these essential elements of the journey of mortality—both putting off the natural man and becoming a saint, both overcoming bad and becoming good—are accomplished through the power of the Atonement. Individual willpower, personal determination and motivation, effective planning and goal setting are necessary but ultimately insufficient for us to triumphantly complete this mortal journey. Truly, we must come to rely upon “the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah” (2 Nephi 2:8).

Grace and the Enabling Power of the Atonement

In the Bible Dictionary we learn that the word *grace* frequently is used in the scriptures to connote enabling power:

“[*Grace* is] a word that occurs frequently in the New Testament, especially in the writings of Paul. The main idea of the word is *divine means of help or strength*, given through the bounteous mercy and love of Jesus Christ.

“It is through the grace of the Lord Jesus, made possible by his atoning sacrifice, that mankind will be raised in immortality, every person receiving his body from the grave in a condition of everlasting life. *It is likewise through the grace of the Lord that individuals, through faith in the atonement of Jesus Christ and repentance of their sins, receive strength and assistance to do good works that they otherwise would not be able to maintain if left to their own means. This grace is an enabling power that allows men and women to lay hold on eternal life and exaltation after they have expended their own best efforts.*”²

Grace is the divine assistance or heavenly help each of us desperately needs to qualify for the celestial kingdom. Thus, the enabling power of the Atonement strengthens us to do and be good and to serve beyond our own individual desire and natural capacity.

In my personal scripture study, I often insert the term “enabling power” whenever I encounter the word *grace*. Consider, for example, this verse with which we are all familiar: “We know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23). I believe we can learn much about this vital aspect of the Atonement if we will insert “enabling and strengthening power” each time we find the word *grace* in the scriptures.

Illustrations and Implications

The journey of mortality is to go from bad to good to better and to have our very natures changed. The Book of Mormon is replete with examples of disciples and prophets who knew,

understood, and were transformed by the enabling power of the Atonement in making that journey. As we come to better understand this sacred power, our gospel perspective will be greatly enlarged and enriched. Such a perspective will change us in remarkable ways.

Nephi is an example of one who knew, understood, and relied upon the enabling power of the Savior. Recall that the sons of Lehi had returned to Jerusalem to enlist Ishmael and his household in their cause. Laman and others in the party traveling with Nephi from Jerusalem back to the wilderness rebelled, and Nephi exhorted his brethren to have faith in the Lord. It was at this point in their journey that Nephi's brothers bound him with cords and planned his destruction. Please note Nephi's prayer: "O Lord, according to my faith which is in thee, wilt thou deliver me from the hands of my brethren; yea, even *give me strength that I may burst these bands* with which I am bound" (1 Nephi 7:17; emphasis added).

Do you know what I likely would have prayed for if I had been tied up by my brothers? "Please get me out of this mess NOW!" It is especially interesting to me that Nephi did not pray to have his circumstances changed. Rather, he prayed for the strength to change his circumstances. And I believe he prayed in this manner precisely because he knew, understood, and had experienced the enabling power of the Atonement.

I do not think the bands with which Nephi was bound just magically fell from his hands and wrists. Rather, I suspect he was blessed with both persistence and personal strength beyond his natural capacity, that he then "in the strength of the Lord" (Mosiah 9:17) worked and twisted and tugged on the cords, and ultimately and literally was enabled to break the bands.

The implication of this episode for each of us is straightforward. As you and I come to understand and employ the enabling power of the Atonement in our personal lives, we will pray and seek for strength to change our circumstances rather than praying for our circumstances to be changed. We will become agents who act rather than objects that are acted upon (see 2 Nephi 2:14).

Consider the example in the Book of Mormon as Alma and his people are persecuted by Amulon. The voice of the Lord came to these good people in their affliction and indicated:

"I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs. ...

"And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, *the Lord did strengthen them* that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord" (Mosiah 24:14–15; emphasis added).

What was changed in this episode? It was not the burden that changed; the challenges and difficulties of persecution were not immediately removed from the people. But Alma and his followers were strengthened, and their increased capacity and strength made the burdens they bore lighter. These good people were empowered through the Atonement to *act* as agents and

impact their circumstances. And “in the strength of the Lord” Alma and his people were then directed to safety in the land of Zarahemla.

You legitimately may be wondering, “What makes the episode with Alma and his people an example of the enabling power of the Atonement?” The answer is found in a comparison of Mosiah 3:19 and Mosiah 24:15.

“And putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh 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; emphasis added).

As we progress in the journey of mortality from bad to good to better, as we put off the natural man or woman in each of us, and as we strive to become saints and have our very natures changed, then the attributes detailed in this verse increasingly should describe the type of person you and I are becoming. We will become more childlike, more submissive, more patient, and more willing to submit.

Now compare these characteristics in Mosiah 3:19 with those used to describe Alma and his people: “And they did *submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord*” (Mosiah 24:15; emphasis added).

I find the parallels between the attributes described in these verses striking and an indication that Alma’s good people were becoming a better people through the enabling power of the Atonement of Christ the Lord.

Recall the story of Alma and Amulek contained in Alma 14. In this incident many faithful Saints had been put to death by fire, and these two servants of the Lord had been imprisoned and beaten. Consider this petition offered by Alma as he prayed in prison: “O Lord, *give us strength according to our faith which is in Christ, even unto deliverance*” (Alma 14:26; emphasis added).

Here again we see Alma’s understanding of and confidence in the enabling power of the Atonement reflected in his request. And note the result of this prayer:

“And they [Alma and Amulek] broke the cords with which they were bound; and when the people saw this, they began to flee, for the fear of destruction had come upon them. ...

“And Alma and Amulek came forth out of the prison, and they were not hurt; for *the Lord had granted unto them power*, according to their faith which was in Christ” (Alma 14:26, 28; emphasis added).

Once again the enabling power is evident as good people struggle against evil and strive to become even better and serve more effectively “in the strength of the Lord.”

Another example from the Book of Mormon is instructive. In Alma 31, Alma is directing a mission to reclaim the apostate Zoramites, who, after building their Rameumptom, offer a prescribed and prideful prayer.

Notice the plea for strength in Alma's personal prayer: "O Lord, wilt thou grant unto me *that I may have strength*, that I may suffer with patience these afflictions which shall come upon me, because of the iniquity of this people" (Alma 31:31; emphasis added).

Alma also prays that his missionary companions will receive a similar blessing: "Wilt thou grant unto them *that they may have strength*, that they may bear their afflictions which shall come upon them because of the iniquities of this people" (Alma 31:33; emphasis added).

Alma did not pray to have his afflictions removed. He knew he was an agent of the Lord, and he prayed for the power to act and affect his situation.

The key point of this example is contained in the final verse of Alma 31: "[The Lord] gave them strength, that they should suffer no manner of afflictions, *save it were swallowed up in the joy of Christ*. Now this was according to the prayer of Alma; and this because he prayed in faith" (verse 38; emphasis added).

The afflictions were not removed. But Alma and his companions were strengthened and blessed through the enabling power of the Atonement to "suffer no manner of afflictions, save it were swallowed up in the joy of Christ." What a marvelous blessing. And what a lesson each of us should learn.

Examples of the enabling power are not found only in the scriptures. Daniel W. Jones was born in 1830 in Missouri, and he joined the Church in California in 1851. In 1856 he participated in the rescue of handcart companies that were stranded in Wyoming by severe snowstorms. After the rescue party had found the suffering Saints, provided what immediate comfort they could, and made arrangements for the sick and the feeble to be transported to Salt Lake City, Daniel and several other young men volunteered to remain with and safeguard the company's possessions. The food and supplies left with Daniel and his colleagues were meager and rapidly expended. The following quote from Daniel Jones's personal journal describes the events that followed.

"Game soon became so scarce that we could kill nothing. We ate all the poor meat; one would get hungry eating it. Finally that was all gone, nothing now but hides were left. We made a trial of them. A lot was cooked and eaten without any seasoning and it made the whole company sick. ...

"Things looked dark, for nothing remained but the poor raw hides taken from starved cattle. We asked the Lord to direct us what to do. The brethren did not murmur, but felt to trust in God. ... Finally I was impressed how to fix the stuff and gave the company advice, telling them how to cook it; for them to scorch and scrape the hair off; this had a tendency to kill and purify the bad taste that scalding gave it. After scraping, boil one hour in plenty of water, throwing the water away which had extracted all the glue, then wash and scrape the hide thoroughly, washing in

cold water, then boil to a jelly and let it get cold, and then eat with a little sugar sprinkled on it. This was considerable trouble, but we had little else to do and it was better than starving.

“We asked the Lord to bless our stomachs and *adapt them to this food*. . . . On eating now all seemed to relish the feast. We were three days without eating before this second attempt was made. We enjoyed this sumptuous fare for about six weeks.”³

In those circumstances I probably would have prayed for something else to eat: “Heavenly Father, please send me a quail or a buffalo.” It likely would not have occurred to me to pray that my stomach would be strengthened and adapted to the food we had. What did Daniel W. Jones know? He knew about the enabling power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. He did not pray that his circumstances would be changed. He prayed that he would be strengthened to deal with his circumstances. Just as Alma and his people, Amulek, and Nephi were strengthened, Daniel W. Jones had the spiritual insight to know what to ask for in that prayer.

The enabling power of the Atonement of Christ strengthens us to do things we could never do on our own. Sometimes I wonder if in our latter-day world of ease—in our world of microwave ovens and cell phones and air-conditioned cars and comfortable homes—we ever learn to acknowledge our daily dependence upon the enabling power of the Atonement.

Sister Bednar is a remarkably faithful and competent woman, and I have learned important lessons about the strengthening power from her quiet example. I watched her persevere through intense and continuous morning sickness—literally sick all day every day for eight months—during each of her three pregnancies. Together we prayed that she would be blessed, but that challenge was never removed. Instead, she was enabled to do physically what she could not do in her own power. Over the years I have also watched how she has been magnified to handle the mocking and scorn that come from a secular society when a Latter-day Saint woman heeds prophetic counsel and makes the family and the nurturing of children her highest priorities. I thank and pay tribute to Susan for helping me to learn such invaluable lessons.

The Savior Knows and Understands

In Alma chapter 7 we learn how and why the Savior is able to provide the enabling power:

“He shall go forth, suffering *pains* and *afflictions* and *temptations* of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the *pains* and the *sicknesses* of his people.

“And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and 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; emphasis added).

The Savior has suffered not just for our iniquities but also for the inequality, the unfairness, the pain, the anguish, and the emotional distresses that so frequently beset us. There is no physical pain, no anguish of soul, no suffering of spirit, no infirmity or weakness that you or I ever

experience during our mortal journey that the Savior did not experience first. You and I in a moment of weakness may cry out, “No one understands. No one knows.” No human being, perhaps, knows. But the Son of God perfectly knows and understands, for He felt and bore our burdens before we ever did. And because He paid the ultimate price and bore that burden, He has perfect empathy and can extend to us His arm of mercy in so many phases of our life. He can reach out, touch, succor—literally run to us—and strengthen us to be more than we could ever be and help us to do that which we could never do through relying upon only our own power.

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28–30).

I declare my witness of and appreciation for the infinite and eternal sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. I know the Savior lives. I have experienced both His redeeming power and His enabling power, and I testify that these powers are real and available to each of us. Indeed, “in the strength of the Lord” we can do and overcome all things as we press forward on our journey of mortality.

Nephi did not pray to have his circumstances changed. Rather, he prayed for the strength to change his circumstances.

The voice of the Lord came to Alma and his people in their affliction and indicated: “I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs.”

There is no physical pain, no anguish of soul, no suffering of spirit, no infirmity or weakness that you or I ever experience during our mortal journey that the Savior did not experience first.