

Christ's Atoning Sacrifice

THE ROLE OF THE CRUCIFIXION

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ON a February evening I sat down to prepare the Sunday School lesson for a class of thirteen-year-olds; on page 56 of the teacher's manual, I read:

Draw a priority chart with 1st, 2nd, 3rd across the top and A (cross), B (garden), and C (washing) down the side. . . . Let A represent Christ hanging on the cross, B his suffering in the garden of Gethsemane, and C Christ washing the feet of the apostles. . . . have the students rank the events first, second and third in order of their feelings for Christ's greatest act of love. Have them show their decision by raising their hands. Count the number of hands raised and write it in the correct box on the priority chart.

It is important that the students understand that Christ's greatest act of love was shown when he suffered for the sins of the world in the garden of Gethsemane.¹

I was appalled by the idea of asking a group of teenagers to rank their Savior's actions and to vote on them according to their own very limited understanding. I was stunned by the idea that Christ showed less love on the cross than he did in Gethsemane, or that Gethsemane can be considered apart from the cross. I began working on a rewarding personal search through the scriptures, reading about and studying the sacrifice and atonement of Jesus Christ.

Centering the Atonement in the Garden of Gethsemane is new to Mormonism. I have been a Church member all my life and have taught in each of the auxiliary organizations. Every lesson manual I used prior to that course taught that Christ took upon

himself the sins of the world in preparation for his great sacrifice (D&C 19:16-19), that he bore these sins upon the cross (1 Pet. 2:24), that by his death he atoned for the sins of mankind (Heb. 9), which reconciled man to God (Jacob 4:11), and that he preserved the marks of the Crucifixion in his resurrected body as evidence that he had been slain for the sins of the world (3 Ne. 11:11, 14). The sacramental hymns also taught me from childhood to revere the sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross:

Let me not forget, O Savior
Thou didst bleed and die for me
When thy heart was stilled and broken
On the cross at Calvary.²

The scriptures themselves contain overwhelming evidence of the importance of the Crucifixion. The death of Christ, the great and last sacrifice on the cross, was predicted by Old Testament and Book of Mormon prophets, and foreshadowed by types and images. These shadows began so long ago that even the heathen nations preserved legends of the dying god. C. S. Lewis writes in *Surprised by Joy*, that his resistance to Christianity was shattered when an atheist friend, remarking on the good evidence for the historicity of the gospels said, "Rum thing. . . . All that stuff of Frazer's about the Dying God. Rum thing. Almost looks as if it had really happened once."³

Scholars might debate the source of these ancient beliefs, but Mormons know where they came from. The scriptures teach us that prophets of each dispensation from Adam on were given knowledge of Christ's



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atonement sacrifice. When Adam offered sacrifice after being driven from the Garden of Eden, an angel asked him why he did so. He answered, "I know not, save the Lord commanded me. And the angel spake, saying: This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father" (Moses 5:6-7).

Another type and shadow of the ultimate sacrifice was given when Abraham, the friend of God, was asked to sacrifice Isaac. As he prepared to slay the boy, an angel intervened and said, "Lay not thine hand upon the lad . . . for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me" (Gen. 22:12). Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is comparable to the love of the Father in Heaven, who "spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32). And as Isaac walked willingly up Mt. Moriah and laid himself upon the altar, so Christ "loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). The immensity of this sacrifice is noted by biblical commentator W. Popkes: "That God delivers up his Son is one of the most unheard-of statements in the New Testament. We must understand 'deliver up' in its full sense and not water it down to mean 'send' or 'give.' What happened here is what Abraham did not need to do to Isaac."⁴ Isaac did not have to die; a substitute was provided for him (Gen. 22:13). The ram was offered in place of Isaac just as the Son of God died as a ransom for us all (Matt. 20:28).

Still another symbol of Christ's crucifixion is the brazen serpent which Moses lifted upon a pole in the wilderness by the Red Sea: "And it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived" (Num. 21:9). The serpent is referred to as a prophetic type in the gospel of John (3:14-15; 12:32-33), and in Alma (33:19), and in Helaman: "As many as should look upon the Son of God with faith, having a contrite spirit, might live" (Hel. 8:14-15).

Jesus himself emphasized the importance of the cross when he told his disciples in Palestine, "When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me" (John 8:28). He further told his disciples in America, "My Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works" (3 Ne. 27:14).

The entire law of Moses with its feasts, cleansings, and sacrifices was designed to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of Christ. Even before the institution of the law, the Israelites killed a lamb without blemish and painted their doorposts with its blood so the

angel of death would pass over them (Ex. 12:1-14), and subsequently the blood of the lamb, in addition to that of other animals, was offered as an atonement for sins on the altar of the tabernacle (Lev. 17:11). Christ's death was the ultimate sacrifice which fulfilled the law of Moses and made permanent atonement, taking away the sins of all (Heb. 10:10-12). John the Baptist referred to Christ's atoning sacrifice when he saw him walking along the banks of the River Jordan and said, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The title of "the Lamb" was also used by Nephi (1 Ne. 12) and by John in Revelation (e.g., Rev. 5:12; 12:11), and Peter called him a lamb without spot and without blemish whose blood redeemed us, "who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world" (1 Pet. 1:19-20).

Abinadi also preached that Christ's sacrifice was a fulfillment of the Mosaic law which was a type and shadow of it (Mosiah 16:14). In addition, he taught that Christ's sacrifice, like the offerings made by the priests in the temple, was to redeem men from their individual sins: "Behold I say unto you, that when his soul has been made an offering for sin he shall see his seed. . . . all those who have . . . believed that the Lord would redeem his people, and have looked forward to that day for the remission of their sins . . . these are they whose sins he has borne; these are they for whom he has died, to redeem them from their transgressions." (Mosiah 15:9-12.) And Amulek, too, preached that Christ was the great and last sacrifice made for individual sins and also as an atonement for Adam's fall: "Christ shall come among the children of men, to take upon him the transgressions of his people, and . . . he shall atone for the sins of the world. . . . for according to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish. . . . then shall there be . . . a stop to the shedding of blood; then shall the law of Moses be fulfilled. . . . And behold 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." (Alma 34:8-9, 13-14.) In his first letter, John says that Christ is "the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:2). The scriptures do not make a distinction between Christ's suffering and death to redeem mankind from Adam's fall, and his suffering and death to redeem mankind from individual sins. Thus, *atonement* and *redemption* are two words for the same act.

The Book of Mormon prophets preached that the resurrection came as a direct result of the Atonement, and that it is mankind's bodily resurrection which gives men the agency and the opportunity to repent and stand



The Prophet Joseph Smith didn't change Mark or Matthew to include Christ's bloody sweat in Gethsemane. Indeed, the omission of the agony in the garden from the gospel of John is puzzling, as is the complete silence of Peter and Paul on the subject. The Book of Mormon also omits this information.

before the Lord to be judged. Samuel the Lamanite said: "For behold, he surely must die that salvation may come. . . . Yea, behold, this death bringeth to pass the resurrection, and redeemeth all mankind from the first death—that spiritual death [caused by the fall of Adam]. . . . But behold, the resurrection of Christ redeemeth mankind . . . and bringeth them back into the presence of the Lord. Yea, and it *bringeth to pass the condition of repentance.*" (Hel. 14:15-18, emphasis added.) Lehi says that the redemption from Adam's fall makes men "free to know good and evil and to act for themselves" and to be judged for their own sins (2 Ne. 2:26). And according to Paul, "It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us" (Rom. 8:34). Christ atoned for our sins and, at the same time, redeemed us from the fall of Adam so that "mercy claimeth the penitent, and mercy cometh because of the atonement; and the atonement bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead; and the resurrection of the dead bringeth men into the presence of God; and thus they are restored into his presence, to be judged according to their own works, according to law and justice" (Alma 42:23).

After reading so many scriptures testifying of the importance of Christ's crucifixion, I wonder at the assurance with which the author of my lesson manual says that Christ's greatest act of love took place in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke alone of the synoptic gospels gives a description of the bloody sweat which is amplified in Joseph Smith's translation. Joseph Smith didn't change Mark or Matthew to include this, nor did he add anything about Gethsemane to John.

The omission of the agony in Gethsemane from the gospel of John is, indeed, puzzling, as is the complete silence of Peter and Paul on the subject. Paul, after the resurrected Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus, dedicated the rest of his life to missionary work, preaching the crucified and risen Christ: "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Paul rehearsed his conversion and the message given to him over and over again in skillful permutation, but he never wrote about Gethsemane.

This lack of information about Gethsemane is also common to Book of Mormon scriptures. Nephi, who received a vision of the Savior's life and sacrifice was either not shown Gethsemane, or chose not to describe it (1 Ne. 11). Abinadi preached to King Noah concerning the coming of the Messiah and his great mission without making reference to Gethsemane. None of Alma's many

sermons on the Atonement and Resurrection include it. The only scripture in the Book of Mormon that specifically relates to Christ's suffering which caused blood to come from every pore because of his "anguish for the wickedness . . . of his people" is in Mosiah 3:7, and it makes no direct reference to the Atonement at all, but is, instead, a partial list of the kinds of physical pain Christ suffered throughout his life in somewhat the same manner as Isaiah 53.

The 1983 Relief Society manual states that "he freely partook of the pain in Gethsemane through which he paid the price for our sins."⁵ James E. Talmage's description of Christ's suffering as "a spiritual agony of soul such as only God is capable of suffering,"⁶ and Doctrine and Covenants 19:16-19 are used to support this statement. But neither Talmage nor this passage of scripture say that Christ atoned for our sins in Gethsemane.

Christ's suffering in Gethsemane was certainly a part of his suffering and death which atoned for our sins; he accepted the burden of our sins in Gethsemane. But he did not pay the price for our sins there; the Atonement was not accomplished until he had carried that burden to the cross and had relinquished it with his death. The Crucifixion, not the Garden of Gethsemane, was the symbol of the Atonement which Christ showed his followers when he appeared to them after his resurrection. In Jerusalem he showed his apostles the prints of the nails in his hands and feet (Luke 24:40) and the wound in his side (John 20:20). In America he called his people to him that they might thrust their hands into his side and feel the prints of the nails in his hands and feet, "that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and *have been slain for the sins of the world*" (3 Ne. 11:14, emphasis added). He retained the marks of the Crucifixion in his resurrected body as proof that he was, indeed, the God of Israel whom the prophets had predicted would be the great and last sacrifice for sin. In complete fulfillment of the Mosaic law (which, according to Abinadi, was a type and shadow of Christ's sacrifice), the atoning blood shed on the cross was his life's blood, given at his death (see Lev. 4:3-4, 22-24; 5:6, 9, 17-18; 17:11; Deut. 12:13-14, 27).

At the last supper Jesus introduced the sacrament which would always remind his followers of this blood which was shed for them. He used there the passover "cup of blessing" to initiate the taking of the wine that represents his blood. This passover wine was always mingled with water before being blessed, and is a type and shadow of the blood and water which gushed from the Savior's body when the centurion pierced his side (1 Jn. 5:5-6; Zech. 12:10). Then, after breaking the bread



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Jesus said, "This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). The word which is translated as "in remembrance" is a rare one which, in biblical Greek, always means "a memorial before God," as in Leviticus 24:7.⁷ Furthermore, according to Paul, Christ's body was "broken for you" (1 Cor. 11:24), signifying not only that the Savior's body was given as a sacrifice, but that it was broken by the nails that fastened it to the cross and by the spear that pierced it.

The bread and water taken together are to remind us of "Christ our passover [who] is sacrificed for us" (1 Cor. 5:7) which saves us from death and makes possible Christ's intercession for us if we keep his commandments. Thus partaking of the bread and water permits us to renew the covenants we make at baptism—to keep his commandments, to always remember him, and to take his name upon us (D&C 20:77-79). We can only take the sacrament after repentance and baptism (3 Ne. 18:11), which makes us members of Christ's kingdom, and therefore his sons and his daughters, the "seed" of which Abinadi spoke when he said, "these are they whose sins he has borne" (Mosiah 15:12). Christ himself referred to the link between this spiritual adoption and the cross when he said, "I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was crucified for the sins of the world, even as many as will believe on my name, that they may become the sons of God" (D&C 35:2).

Those who say that Jesus' suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane paid the price for our sins have misinterpreted Doctrine and Covenants 19:16-19 which states: "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—Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men." Some Mormons think that the phrase "partook and finished my preparations" means that Christ drank the entire "cup" of suffering and finished the Atonement in the Garden of Gethsemane. However the dictionary definition of *partake* is "to take a part or share" and the definition of *prepare* is "to make ready beforehand for some purpose, use, or activity."⁸ Therefore, a more accurate interpretation of this scripture seems to be, "Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I drank a portion of the cup and got ready to carry out my duty for the children of men."⁹ That this is correct is borne out by John 18:11:

When Jesus and his apostles left the Garden of Gethsemane and were accosted by the priests and soldiers, Peter cut off the ear of Malcus. "Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put up the sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" Peter states positively that Christ in "his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed" (1 Pet. 2:24).

Some might say that when Christ said, "glory be to the Father" (D&C 19:19), he indicated that he had fulfilled the Father's will and had completed his atonement for the sins of mankind. But he used the same idea of glory for the Father when Judas left the supper table to betray him, saying, "Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him" (John 13:31). When he appeared to the Nephites, Christ said, "I . . . have glorified the Father by taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning" (3 Ne. 11:11). In each instance Christ glorified the Father by submitting to his will and making a decision which permitted the Atonement to take place. He was the Redeemer by the will of the Father (D&C 31:13), seeking not his own will, but that of the Father (John 5:30). The Father's will was that the atoning sacrifice should take place so that every human being could be brought back into God's presence in a resurrected body and be assigned a glory of his own (see Abr. 3:25-28). "For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39).

Christ's bloody sweat shed in Gethsemane was part of his intense suffering for mankind. So was the blood shed when the crown of thorns was pressed on his head. He suffered for us under the Roman lash. But the greatest suffering of all occurred on the cross where he was physically tortured and spiritually tormented and abandoned by his Father in Heaven. Elder Talmage writes:

At the ninth hour . . . a loud voice, surpassing the most anguished cry of physical suffering issued from the central cross . . . : "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" What mind of man can fathom the significance of that awful cry? It seems, that in addition to the fearful suffering incident to crucifixion, the agony of Gethsemane had recurred, intensified beyond human power to endure. In that bitter hour the dying Christ was alone, alone in most terrible reality. That the supreme sacrifice of the Son might be consummated in all its fulness, the Father seems to have withdrawn the support of His immediate Presence, leaving the Savior of men the glory of complete victory over the forces of sin and death.¹⁰



The 1983 Relief Society manual states that Jesus “partook of the pain in Gethsemane through which he paid for our sins,” citing James E. Talmage’s *Jesus the Christ* and Doctrine and Covenants 19 as its sources. Yet neither of these texts say that Christ atoned for our sins in the garden.

Luke says that in Gethsemane an angel appeared to strengthen the suffering Christ (Luke 22:43), but on the cross the Father abandoned him and he suffered alone as he conquered sin and death. In Jesus’ own estimation his greatest act of love was not his suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, but his death on the cross: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

During the weeks that I have read and studied the scriptures, I have come to the conclusion that I must accept Christ’s own statements concerning his greatest act of love. But I asked myself many times, “Does it really matter *where* the Atonement took place?” The answer is, “Yes, it does matter.” The Atonement is the great and last sacrifice predicted by the prophets and the law of Moses. This is of great significance to Latter-day Saint belief in prophetic revelation recorded in scripture. That Christ suffered and died for our sins on the cross is scriptural truth: “He was delivered for our offenses” (Rom. 4:25), and was “made a curse for us” (Gal 3:13; see also Deut. 21:23), and was a “sacrifice for sin” (2 Ne. 2:7). Moreover the scriptures clearly state that it was particularly Christ’s submission to the suffering imposed upon him by other men which enabled him to atone for the sins of each repentant sinner: “Jesus was crucified by sinful men for the sins of the world, yea for the remission of sins unto the contrite heart” (D&C 21:9). This matters. Indeed, it is vitally important to our understanding of Christ and his mission. For when we reject the Christ of Isaiah who was oppressed and afflicted, taken from prison and from judgment, and stricken for the transgressions of his people (Isa. 53; Mosiah 14), we lose sight of the real Jesus who became a man and took upon himself the pains and sicknesses of his people (Alma 7:11-13). We need to recognize that Christ accepted the most disreputable death of his time¹¹ and descended below all in a specific physical sense (D&C 122) so that he could become the judge of all: “For it behooveth the great Creator that he suffereth himself to become subject unto man in the flesh, and die for all men that all men might be subject unto him. . . . he suffereth the pains . . . of every living creature . . . who belong[s] to the family of Adam. . . . that the resurrection might pass upon all men, that all might stand before him at the great and judgment day.” (2 Ne. 9:5, 21-22.) “And [he] took upon him the form of a servant. . . . And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That . . . every knee should bow . . . and . . . every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord.” (Philip. 2:7-11.)

As Elder Talmage observes, “However incomplete may be our comprehension of Christ’s vicarious sacrifice in all its parts, we cannot reject it without becoming infidel; for it stands the fundamental doctrine of all scripture.”¹² Note that Elder Talmage says it is “the fundamental doctrine of *all* scripture.” I think that one of the most important things I learned from my reading and studying of the scriptures concerning the atoning sacrifice is that all the scriptures are important; one cannot pick and choose. We can’t set aside the Book of Mormon and all the letters of Paul on the basis of a particular evaluation of three verses in the Doctrine and Covenants. We must consider all scriptures carefully before we change the center of our belief from the crucified and risen Christ to the private suffering of the Savior in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We have much to contribute to the world’s understanding of Christ’s mission, but Latter-day scriptures teach the same good news preached by Christ’s disciples in the Old World: Christ, who was crucified for us, is risen, and we will be lifted up before him at the last judgment day just as he was lifted up upon the cross.

Notes

1. *Introduction to the Scriptures, Part B* [Sunday School Course 13 teacher’s manual] (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1980), p. 56.
2. “In Humility Our Savior,” *Hymns: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1948), no. 49.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1955), pp. 223-24.
4. W. Popkes, as quoted in Juergen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), p. 191.
5. *Relief Society Courses of Study 1983* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), p. 31.
6. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 11th ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1945), p. 613.
7. J. R. Dummelow, ed., *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1955), pp. 710, 1057, 766-67.
8. *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. “partake,” “prepare.”
9. In 3 Nephi 11:11 the Savior says that he drank “out of” the cup, which means he took a choice or selection from the whole of it (see *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. “out of”).
10. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, pp. 660-61, italics in original.
11. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 33.
12. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, [30th ed.?] (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1949), p. 77.

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