

Faith, an Anchor for the Soul

Brad Wilcox and Wendee Wilcox

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For further information write:

BYU Women's Conference

352 Harman Continuing Education Building

Provo, Utah 84602

801-422-7692

E-mail: womens_conference@byu.edu

Home page: <http://womensconference.byu.edu>

In Ether 12:4 we read: "Wherefore, whoso believeth in God might with surety hope for a better world, yea, even a place at the right hand of God, which hope cometh of faith, maketh an anchor to the souls of men, which would make them sure and steadfast, always abounding in good works, being led to glorify God."

Steadfastness and good works come from hope and faith, but not just any faith. Many people who are not members of the Church believe in God. They even like to swap stories over the Internet about God and angels. Still, in many cases their faith doesn't affect or change them. They rarely make any choice in their lives differently because of their professed faith than they would if they had no faith at all. Faith is not an anchor to them. That helps us better understand what Joseph Smith taught in the *Lectures on Faith*. He said that true faith is more than knowing there is a God. It is knowing God—knowing His attributes and His relationship to us. We must know He has a plan for us and that we are living in accordance with that plan.¹ Many people believe there is a higher power, but without knowing Him, they are limited in accessing that higher power to help them improve. Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve has said: "You must understand and use the power of the interaction of faith and character. God uses your faith to mold your character. . . . In turn, fortified character expands your ability to exercise faith."² That is the life-changing cycle that many have yet to discover.

Christians have faith in Jesus Christ, but not a true faith as Joseph Smith described. Millions of Christians in this world follow Christ and many do so with all sincerity of heart. But it is one thing to follow Christ and another thing entirely to be led by Him. Latter-day Saints are the only Christians on this globe who are led by Christ the same way He has always led His people, through living prophets and apostles. That sets our faith apart. Just as Joseph Smith defined a true faith in God, we testify that a true faith in Christ is more than just knowing about Him like many in the world, or even believing He is divine like many Christians. We must know His Atonement is real. We must use it to be transformed, and we must realize it is a continuous force in our lives.

The Atonement Is Real

We remember a man in Chile who asked, "Who needs a Savior?" Obviously, he has no

understanding of the Fall and its effects. He certainly doesn't understand the precariousness and limited duration of his present state. Perhaps this man has not yet felt the sting of death. But he will. Perhaps he has justified and rationalized his sins for so long that he doesn't feel the sting of guilt, remorse, and shame. But he will. Sooner or later, someone close to him will die and he will know what it is like to feel as if part of his soul is being buried right along with the body of his loved one. On that day, he will hurt. He will need a Savior. Sooner or later, he will run out of escape routes and have to face himself in the mirror knowing full well that his sinful, selfish choices have affected others as well as himself. On that day, he will hurt. He will need a Savior.

But the blessings of the Atonement are not limited to freedom from death and sin. It is also there when we feel down, overwhelmed, afraid, and alone. The Atonement is there when we face sickness, pain, or the consequences of the choices of others. It is even there when we make mistakes—not intentional sins, just stupid mistakes. When we hurt, we need a Savior.

John the Baptist cried, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord. . . . Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low" (Luke 3:4–5). That is what Jesus does for us. If the knuckles of my hand represent the valleys and mountains of my life, it is Jesus who offers to hold our hand through both the highs and the lows. He makes the mountains manageable and fills the valleys.

The word *atonement* is from the ancient Hebrew word *Kaphar*, which means to cover. Isn't it interesting that when Adam and Eve discovered their nakedness in the Garden of Eden, God sent Jesus to make coats of skins to cover them? Coats of skins don't grow on trees. They had to be made from an animal, which means an animal had to be killed. Perhaps that was the very first animal sacrifice. Because of that sacrifice, Adam and Eve were covered. In the same way, through Jesus's sacrifice, we are also covered.

When Adam and Eve left the garden, the only things they could take to remind them of that place were the coats of skins. The one thing we take with us out of the temple to remind us of *that* heavenly place is a similar covering. We are always surprised when we hear women say they don't like their garment or that they don't think it is feminine enough. The garment reminds us of covenants, protects us, and even promotes modesty. However, to us it is much more. The garment is a powerful and personal symbol of the Atonement—a constant reminder both night and day that because of Jesus, we are covered.

The Atonement Is Transforming

But is it enough to know that the Savior sacrificed for us, that His Atonement is real? Many Christians know of these realities without fully understanding their complete purpose. Jesus did not come only to save us, but also to redeem us. Most of our lives we have thought the two terms were synonymous, but that is not the case. The second question in the temple recommend interview is: Do you have a testimony of the Atonement of Christ and His role as savior *and redeemer*? The words describe two separate roles and having a testimony of both roles is essential.

By definition, a redeemer is one who buys or wins back; one who frees us from captivity or debt by the payment of ransom; one who returns or restores us to our

original position. However, since our family's mission in Chile we have come to appreciate an additional definition: A redeemer is one who changes us for the better. If our whole goal is just to be in God's presence again, then why did we leave it in the first place? In the premortal existence we were already with God, but we were also painfully aware that we were not like Him physically or spiritually. We wanted to be like our Heavenly Parents and knew it was going to take a lot more than just dressing up in their clothes the way little children do. We needed to fill their shoes and not just clomp around in them. The goal is not just being with God, but being like God. It is common to hear people say, "God loves us and wants us back." But that is only partially right. Christ's redemption doesn't just put us back where we were. It makes us better. God loves us so much He doesn't just want us back. He wants us better. Some are old enough to remember the six-million-dollar man. (He would cost a lot more today!) At the beginning of the TV show the voice would say, "We can rebuild him. We can make him better than before." That's what Jesus does for us.

At Easter time we sing the hymn, "He Is Risen," by Cecil Frances Alexander. The text speaks of Christ's saving role—His victory over death and how He has freed us from sin. But notice how the third verse also speaks of Christ's redeeming role: It says:

"He is risen! He is risen!
He hath opened heaven's gate.
We are free from sin's dark prison,
Risen to a holier state."³

John W. Welch has taught that the parable of the Good Samaritan can be viewed as an allegory of the fall and redemption of mankind. A certain man (Adam) fell and was left for dead. Finally a Samaritan—he that was hated of men (Christ)—saved him. But, the Samaritan didn't just bind his wounds and restore him to the health he enjoyed previously. He also took him to an inn and paid additional funds to take care of him. Based on this allegory, Christ's redemption does not stop with restoring us to life. It also provides a better quality of life (see Luke 10:25–35).⁴

Once, after a lesson about how Jesus had suffered for all of us, a young man said, "I never asked Jesus to do that for me. If anyone has to suffer for my sins, I will do it for myself." This young man was ignorant of the amount and degree of suffering we are talking about. In Doctrine and Covenants 19:18 the Lord says, "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."

But along with not understanding the extent of the suffering, this boy was also ignorant of just what suffering can and cannot do. D&C 19 makes it clear that those who do not repent and accept Jesus's Atonement "must suffer even as [he did]." So will that cocky teenager be able to suffer for his own sins and then waltz into the celestial kingdom and live with God and his family eternally? Will he be beaten "with a few stripes and at last . . . be saved in the kingdom of God"? (2 Nephi 28:8). No. The Book of Mormon makes it clear that such an idea is false, vain, and foolish (see 2 Nephi 28:9). While one can meet the demands of justice by suffering for his own sins, such suffering will not change him. Just as a criminal can pay his debt to justice by doing time in prison and walk out no different, suffering alone does not guarantee change. Real change can only come through Jesus.

We must accept Christ, not because it will save us some pain down the road, but because it is the only way we can become new creatures (see 2 Cor. 5:17; Mosiah 3:19). No one walks into the celestial kingdom simply because a debt is paid, whether it is paid by Jesus or by ourselves. The justified must still be sanctified. Those who dwell with God are those who have come to be like Him through fulfilling what He asks. He who met the conditions of justice now turns and meets us with a few conditions of His own. What He asks of us does not pay justice, but helps us change. Christ asks faith, repentance, ordinances, and covenants—not to pay justice, but to allow the Spirit to begin to change and sanctify us.

We once imagined the final judgment as a time when people would be begging Jesus to let them stay in His presence and He would have to say, “Sorry. You missed it by two points.” Then the person would beg Jesus to reconsider. Now we imagine the scene quite differently. Instead of an unworthy person saying, “Let me stay. Let me stay,,” we think he will be saying, “Let me leave. Let me leave.” The unworthy will choose to leave Christ’s presence because they will not be comfortable. No one will have to be kicked out. Sadly enough, he will leave on his own.

We’ve heard our current mortal condition described in many ways. Some say we are in a hole. Others say we are in debt or that we are lost. Whatever the analogy, Jesus doesn’t just save us by lifting us out of the hole. He redeems us by lifting us to a much higher plain. He doesn’t just save us by paying the debt. He redeems us by paying us in addition. He doesn’t just save us by finding the lost. He redeems us by guiding us home. Jesus not only opened to us the possibility of returning to God’s presence, but also of returning with His image in our countenances. Redemption is more than paying justice and bringing everyone back to God. It is mercifully giving us the opportunity of being comfortable there. Not only can we go home, but we can also feel at home.

The Atonement Is Continuous

The Atonement is real, and through repentance and sanctification it is transforming. But that transforming change is a process that takes time—a long time. The Atonement is a continuous force in our lives. Perfection is the ultimate goal, but we get lots of chances to reach it.

Our friend Brett Sanders once pointed out a lesson to be learned when a new priest is blessing the sacrament. He is nervous and messes up when reading the prayer. He knows the prayers have to be perfect and that expectation can’t be lowered. So what happens when the priest makes a mistake? He looks at the bishop, who nods his head and the priest simply begins again. What if he stumbles a second time or a third? Does he finally just give up or is there a trap door that opens and he falls through? No. He just starts again. How many times? As many times as it takes to get it right.

When Brad was serving as the bishop of a BYU ward a young man came to him to confess. He unloaded everything he had ever done wrong since elementary school. Brad heard what he had never had the courage to tell another bishop, stake president, mission president, or parent. While the sins were not of major proportions, they needed to be confessed and should have been taken care of years earlier. Imagine the young man’s relief and joy as he finally let go of all he had been carrying so needlessly, privately, and personally for so long. Brad prayed and reviewed some scriptures with him. They

discussed the role of confession in the repentance process and set goals for the future. When that young man left Brad's office he almost floated out of the room.

The following Sunday Brad looked for him in church, but didn't see him. The next week he wasn't there either. Brad called his apartment and left messages. Finally Brad went over. The young man answered the door, but didn't invite Brad in. The boy's countenance was dark and his eyes hollow. His comments were negative and sarcastic, revealing his depressed mood. Brad asked if he could come in and talk with him.

The young man said, "Like that will make any difference?" His words were cold and hard. "Just face it, Bishop, the Church isn't true. No one can even prove there is a God. It's all just a joke, so don't waste your time."

Wow! From floating on air to the pit of despair, and all in a matter of days. Brad's first reaction was to become angry. He had no call to be so rude. Brad also wanted to defend the truthfulness of the Church and the existence of God, but then he had one of those bishop moments. Instead of raising his voice or quoting scripture, Brad simply said, "You messed up again, didn't you?"

The young returned missionary's darkened expression melted and he began to cry. Between sobs he motioned Brad into his empty apartment and they sat together on the couch. The young man said, "Bishop, I'm sorry. I just feel so bad. I finally repented. I was finally clean. I finally put it all behind me. I finally used the Atonement and felt so good. Then I blew it all over again. Now, my former sins have returned and I feel like the worst person in the world."

"So the Church is true and there is a God after all?" Brad asked.

"Of course," he said sheepishly.

"So you just need another chance?"

"But that's the problem. D&C 58:43: 'By this may ye know if a man repenteth of his sins, behold he will confess them and forsake them.' I confessed. I didn't forsake. So I didn't really repent. It's over."

"Tell me about the Savior's grace then."

He said, "Oh, you know 2 Nephi 25:23: We are saved by grace 'after all we can do.' We do our best and then Christ makes up the difference. But I did that and it didn't work. I still went out and did the same old dumb thing. I blew it. Nothing changed."

Brad said, "Hold on. What do you mean Christ makes up the difference? Christ doesn't just make up the difference. He makes all the difference. He requires us to repent, but not as part of paying justice—only as part of helping us to change."

The young man said, "I thought it was like buying a bike. I pay all I can and then Jesus pays the rest."

I said, "I love Brother Robinson's parable. He has helped us all see that there are two

essential parts that must be completed, but I think of it more like this: Jesus already bought the whole bike. The few coins he asks from me are not so much to help pay for the bike, but rather to help me value it and appreciate it.”

The returned missionary said, “Either way, it doesn’t matter since I just crashed the bike. So much for grace!”

Brad said, “Wait. What do you mean, *so much for grace*? You think this is just a one-shot deal? Don’t you realize that Jesus has a whole garage full of bikes? Knowing that Christ makes the difference doesn’t mean much unless we also realize how often He does it. The miracle of the Atonement is that He will forgive our sins (plural) and that is not just multiple sins, but also multiple times we commit the same sin.”

Of course we don’t condone sin. Joseph Smith taught clearly that “repentance is a thing that cannot be trifled with everyday.”⁵ Still, the same Jesus who forgives those who “know not what they do” (Luke 23:24), will also forgive those of us who know exactly what we do and just can’t seem to stop (see Rom. 3:23).

Brad said to the returned missionary, “Christ commanded us to forgive others 70 times 7 times (see Matt. 18:22). And we don’t think He is going to forgive us more than once?”

The young man’s face began to show hints of a smile. “You’re saying there is still hope for me?”

“Now you are beginning to understand grace,” Brad said.

In 1 Corinthians 15:9 we read that there is always hope in Christ. Elder Neal A. Maxwell called the gospel inexhaustible.⁶ Perhaps that is a good word for the Atonement as well—the inexhaustible Atonement. We hear many words associated with the Atonement. We hear it is infinite, eternal, everlasting, perfect, divine, incomprehensible, inexplicable, and even personal and individual. However, there is another word that must be more closely associated with the Atonement if we are ever going to be able to maintain hope in this world full of addictions. And that word is *continuous*—the continuous Atonement.

Preach My Gospel explains, “Ideally, repenting of a specific sin should be necessary only once. However, if the sin is repeated, repentance is available as a means of healing. Repentance may involve an emotional and physical process.”⁷

So next time a priest in your ward has to begin the sacrament prayers again—next time he has to start over—just remember that is what the sacrament is all about. That’s what the Atonement is all about—the continuous Atonement.

Verbal expressions of belief or faith can’t save us. True faith always results in faithfulness. True faith in Jesus Christ is trust in, confidence in, and reliance upon the Atonement. We must know it is real, that its purpose is to transform us, and that it will be there as long as that perfecting process takes. It is continuous. With that testimony, we, like the returned missionary, can surely hope for a better world, yea even a place at the right hand of God. That is the hope and true faith that becomes an anchor to our

souls.

When we, or those we love, are stuck in cycles of compulsive behavior, and we say, “I’ll never do it again” and then we do it and we say, “I’ll never do it again” and then we do it and we say, “This is so stupid. I will never do it again” and then we do it—there is always hope.

We don’t have to pretend there is no God or desperately try to find reasons why the Church is not true in order to avoid change. We don’t have to seek out others who are struggling so we feel justified, or hate those who aren’t struggling so we can feel better. We don’t have to hate ourselves. We just have to let faith be an anchor for our souls and begin again. How many times? As many times as it takes. We can have true faith because we have a Savior who covers us, a Redeemer who transforms us, and a Good Shepherd who is willing to go in search of us again and again—continuously.

Notes

1. See Lectures on Faith
2. “Living Right,” *Ensign*, January 2007, 10–12.
3. *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 199; emphasis added.
4. “The Good Samaritan: Forgotten Symbols,” *Ensign*, February 2007, 41–47.
5. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 148.
6. [biography], 345.
7. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2005), 187.