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FAITH UNTO REPENTANCE

Brent L. Top

In every dispensation, from Adam to the present day, the Lord's anointed prophets have been under a divine mandate to "preach nothing save it were repentance and faith on the Lord" (Mosiah 18:20). The central message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is and has always been that through the Atonement of the Lamb of God, the scarlet sins of man can become "white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18). Without a knowledge and acceptance of what the scriptures generally, and the Book of Mormon specifically, teach about the doctrine of repentance, one may seek through self-justification to make repentance easier than it really is or through doctrinal distortion to make it more difficult than it needs to be.

DOCTRINAL DEFICIENCIES OF "CHECKLIST" REPENTANCE

When we view repentance as a mere checklist of steps that must be taken for every sin ever committed, we fall prey to the spiritual pitfalls and doctrinal deficiencies of such a simplistic and superficial approach. Several deficiencies, each with potential pitfalls, are evident.

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First, without the understanding that repentance is a fruit of faith, a person may go through a repentance checklist and feel satisfied he has met all the requirements for repentance but not realize his efforts have not been efficacious. Checklist repentance undertaken without faith in the Redeemer may produce results similar to those described by the prophet Isaiah: “It shall be unto them, even as unto a hungry man which dreameth, and behold he eateth but he awaketh and his soul is empty; or like unto a thirsty man which dreameth, and behold he drinketh but he awaketh and behold he is faint, and his soul hath appetite” (2 Nephi 27:3).

Second, a mechanical approach to repentance may prevent the repentant sinner from ever “catching up.” Seeking to apply some arbitrary checklist for every sin committed is like taking two steps backward for each step forward. Because we continually make mistakes and sin, it becomes impossible to conscientiously go through this process for every sin. An overemphasis on the mechanics of repentance may leave one so discouraged, thinking it impossible to fully repent for every sin, that he may give up in despair and sink deeper into the quicksands of sin.

A third deficiency in this approach to repentance is that for some sins and situations there may not be any way to complete the checklist. The “Rs of Repentance” (such as restitution) may not apply. President Spencer W. Kimball wrote, “There are some sins for which no adequate restitution can be made, and others for which only partial restitution is possible.”¹

The final and most important doctrinal fallacy in the concept of checklist repentance is that by concentrating on our outward actions we tend to emphasize our efforts and ignore the cleansing power of Christ. This approach to repentance makes it appear as though a remission of sins is something obtained primarily by mortal effort. Such a view minimizes the miraculous Atonement of Jesus Christ and the grace of God that makes a remission of sins possible. If we focus all of our attention and efforts on the steps we must take to repent, we tend to overlook what He did to make repentance possible. A humanistic or mechanical approach to repentance promotes “pseudo self-reliance.”

Relying only upon our own efforts robs us of the repentance-enabling power of Christ. Thus the worst danger of this superficial view of repentance is that it causes an unwitting but crucial oversight of the most important “R” of repentance—Redeemer.

FAITH IN CHRIST AS THE FOUNDATION OF ALL TRUE REPENTANCE

The Book of Mormon is replete with examples and teachings on faith in the Lord as the empowering ingredient in repentance. The prophet Enos learned firsthand from the Lord the central role of faith in true repentance. In Enos’s account of his “wrestle” before God, which led him to a remission of sins, we do not see him going methodically through some series of steps to repent. We see him pondering the words of eternal life, pleading with the Lord to satisfy his spiritual hunger:

“And my soul hungered; and I kneeled down before my Maker, and I cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication for mine own soul; and all the day long did I cry unto him; yea, and when the night came I did still raise my voice high that it reached the heavens.

“And there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed.

“And I, Enos, knew that God could not lie; wherefore, my guilt was swept away.

“And I said: Lord, how is it done?

“And he said unto me: *Because of thy faith in Christ . . . thy faith hath made thee whole*” (Enos 1:4–8; emphasis added).

The Lord simply stated that it was faith in Christ that had brought about Enos’s remission of sins, and not his outward actions of repentance, as important as they were. Enos learned what Nephi had taught earlier—that a remission of sins and ultimate salvation cannot be obtained merely by righteous deeds but rather through “unshaken faith in [Christ], relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (2 Nephi 31:19). “True repentance is based on and flows from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,” declared President Ezra Taft Benson. “There is no other way.”²

When we rely “wholly upon the merits” of Christ, we will submit to the designated requirements of repentance as a natural consequence of faith instead of an adherence to a checklist. Our actions and attitudes of penitence become evidence of our faith and not a substitute for it.

The prophet Amulek also taught that it is the “great and last sacrifice” of Jesus Christ that gives power and efficacy to the doctrine of repentance. He emphatically declared that faith must precede repentance for the cleansing mercy of the Messiah to be enjoyed:

“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, yea, infinite and eternal.

“And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have *faith unto repentance*.

“And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no *faith unto repentance* is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has *faith unto repentance* is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption.

“Therefore may God grant unto you, my brethren, that ye may begin to exercise your *faith unto repentance*, that ye begin to call upon his holy name, that he would have mercy upon you;

“Yea, cry unto him for mercy; for he is mighty to save” (Alma 34:14–18; emphasis added).

Perhaps no scriptural example better illustrates Amulek’s teaching of “faith unto repentance” and the need to “cry unto [God] for mercy” than the Book of Mormon account of Alma the Younger’s dramatic conversion. Alma was a sinner who was “racked with torment” and “harrowed up by the memory of [his] many sins,” who pleaded with the Lord to do something for him that he could not do for himself. Again, we do not see Alma mechanically going through a series of steps to repentance. In fact, there is no scriptural evidence that he had previously performed any of the actions traditionally taught as sequential

steps to forgiveness. The record reveals, however, that Alma's miraculous change from a life of sin to a life of service and spirituality resulted from his "faith unto repentance":

"And it came to pass that as I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins, behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world.

"Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.

"And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.

"And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!" (Alma 36:17–20).

Merciful relief was extended to Alma because of his newly exercised faith in the atonement of Christ. Alma's subsequent abandonment of sinful practices, his restitution for past mistakes, and his life of continued commitment to the kingdom of God grew out of his faith in the cleansing power of Christ's atonement. Another scriptural example also affirms this principle. Nephi saw in vision the Savior's twelve apostles, who "*because of their faith in the Lamb of God their garments are made white in his blood. . . . These are made white in the blood of the Lamb, because of their faith in him*" (1 Nephi 12:8–11; emphasis added). The cleansing of our garments comes to us, as it did to Enos, Alma, and the ancient apostles, not because of our own righteous acts but "because of the righteousness of thy Redeemer" (2 Nephi 2:3)—because of His infinite atonement.

Indeed, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the first principle of the gospel and repentance as the second, along with all other principles and ordinances of the gospel, have their foundation in the Savior's atoning sacrifice. Truly, then, repentance stems only from faith in the redemptive and cleansing power of the blood of the Lamb of God. Elder

Orson Pratt taught, “The first effect of true faith is a sincere, true, and thorough repentance of all sins. Faith is the starting point—the foundation and cause of our repentance.”³

Without the merciful Atonement, there could be no forgiveness of our sins. And without unwavering faith in that Atonement, there can be neither repentance nor saving works of righteousness. Thus, paraphrasing Nephi’s familiar teaching, it is by grace that we receive a remission of our sins, after all we can do (see 2 Nephi 25:23).

While there really is no set recipe or checklist of steps that must be taken in every case of repentance, we must still do “all we can do.” The Lord has specified that “all we can do” begins with unshaken faith in Christ. Other than this, the Book of Mormon (and the other standard works) gives no list of “Rs” of repentance. It does, however, provide doctrinal teachings and examples of how “faith unto repentance” leads one, both by inward attitudes and outward actions, to fulfill the Lord’s stated requirements of repentance revealed in our day. “By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them” (D&C 58:43).

CONFESSING SIN: INWARD ATTITUDES AND OUTWARD ACTIONS

Speaking of the Nephite Church, Moroni wrote that “they were strict to observe that there should be no iniquity among them; . . . and if they repented not, and confessed not, their names were blotted out, and they were not numbered among the people of Christ” (Moroni 6:7). The Book of Mormon confirms the concept taught in both the Old and New Testaments, as well as in modern revelation, that confession is an integral part of true repentance; whether it be private, personal confession of sins, or a more public confession to the church, such as Moroni described. The act of verbal confession serves as an outward reminder of what should be happening inside the soul of man. Confession is like a mirror in which one can examine himself spiritually and recognize his need for the cleansing power of Christ. The Apostle Paul spoke of confession that involves both the heart and mouth (see Romans 10:10). Similarly, the Book of Mormon teaches that true repentance, born of

faith in Christ, yields an action of confession coming from the mouth that mirrors an attitude of confession born in the heart.

“A Broken Heart and a Contrite Spirit”

True repentance that leads to confession is, as Paul said, born of a “godly sorrow” (see 2 Corinthians 7:9–10). Godly sorrow is the indicator of true faith in Christ and the only genuine motivation for bringing forth “fruit meet for repentance” (Alma 12:15). The Book of Mormon describes the attitude of “godly sorrow” as “a broken heart and a contrite spirit” (2 Nephi 2:7; see also 3 Nephi 9:19–20; 3 Nephi 12:19; Ether 4:15; Moroni 6:2). Both terms can be used interchangeably in describing the concept of God’s sorrow—feeling the sorrow for our sins that God would have us feel in order to bring about our repentance and submission to His will.

Godly sorrow—the broken heart and contrite spirit—is much more than remorse or regret over having sinned. Mormon observed anguish in his own people and described it as “the sorrowing of the damned” (Mormon 2:12–14). It was a sorrow born of sins and circumstances that did not produce “faith unto repentance.” Many may be remorseful for past actions and regret the consequences that have befallen them but do nothing to change, to come unto Christ and partake of His mercy and to comply with the requirements of the gospel. A “broken heart and contrite spirit” is an attitude that always leads to a commitment to change. Alma spoke of this kind of motivational sorrow for sin when he declared to Corianton, “Let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance” (Alma 42:29). “The sorrow that is acceptable in the sight of God, is that which leads to true repentance, or reformation of conduct,” wrote Elder Orson Pratt. “This kind of sorrow will lead us to obey every commandment of God; it will make us humble and childlike in our dispositions; it will impart unto us meekness and lowliness of mind; it will cause our hearts to be broken and our spirits to be contrite; it will cause us to watch, with great carefulness, every word, thought, and deed; it will call up our past dealings with mankind, and we will feel most anxious to make restitution to all whom we may have, in any way,

injured . . . these and many other good things are the results of a Godly sorrow for sin. This is repentance not in word, but in deed: this is the sorrow with which the heavens are pleased.”⁴

When the Book of Mormon describes a “broken heart and contrite spirit” it implies considerably more than just a repentant attitude. We gain a better understanding of the relationship of a “broken heart and contrite spirit” to confession and repentance by examining Book of Mormon statements concerning two important elements of godly sorrow.

An “awful awareness” of our unworthiness before God. Before sinners can exercise “faith unto repentance” and obtain a remission of sins, they must experience something akin to what King Benjamin described as “an awful view of their own guilt and abominations, which doth cause them to shrink from the presence of the Lord” (Mosiah 3:25). That stark realization of guilt, King Benjamin declared, awakens “you to a sense of your nothingness, and your worthless and fallen state” (Mosiah 4:5). It thus produces a total dependence upon the Lord and a humility of soul that permits the seeds of repentance to take root. This “awful awareness” must include a self-inflicted stripping away of all rationalization and self-justification. There is no room in a broken heart and contrite spirit for making feeble excuses or blaming others for our sins. “Do not endeavor to excuse yourself in the least point because of your sins,” Alma counseled Corianton, “but do you let the justice of God, and his mercy, and his long-suffering have full sway in your heart; and let it bring you down to the dust in humility” (Alma 42:30). Accompanying this “awful awareness” of unworthiness before the Lord is the yearning to be cleansed and to stand approved. It is much more than mere recognition of sin. It is a sackcloth-and-ashes humility that promotes spiritual growth and leads one to a condition described by President David O. McKay as a “change of nature befitting heaven.”⁵

Willing submission and surrender to God’s will. The Book of Mormon also teaches that one most important indicator of contrition is a willingness to submit to whatever the Lord requires of us in order to obtain a remission of sins. Not only did King Benjamin teach his people about the necessity of an “awful awareness” of their sinful state, but he also

taught them that their faith in Christ would lead them to voluntarily surrender to the Lord. Overcoming the natural man and obtaining a remission of sins required that “they humble themselves and become as little children” (Mosiah 3:18). A person who has faith in the Lord and desires to be forgiven of sin is willing to do whatever is necessary. He yields his own will “to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, 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” (Mosiah 3:19). Helaman, speaking of church members in his day, described how such submission, born of faith, leads to “the purifying and the sanctification of their hearts, which sanctification cometh because of their yielding their hearts unto God” (Helaman 3:35).

In contrast to the people of King Benjamin and Helaman, some desire repentance whose hearts are not yet broken and whose spirits are less than contrite. Such persons may become selectively submissive. They desire to repent on their own terms rather than on the Lord’s. They wish to make repentance easy, pain-free, and convenient. In reality the process is difficult and demanding and may require humiliation, public embarrassment, pain, restrictions, or inconvenience. Lehi warned such people that Christ offered “himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto *none else* can the ends of the law be answered” (2 Nephi 2:7; emphasis added). “There can be no conditions attached to unconditional surrender to God,” wrote Elder Neal A. Maxwell. “Unconditional surrender means we cannot keep our obsessions, possessions, or cheering constituencies . . . Every obsession or preoccupation must give way in total submission.”⁶

If we truly possess the proper attitude of confession, as taught in the Book of Mormon, our hearts will be broken with a piercing sorrow for sin and an “awful awareness” of our unworthiness and total dependence upon the mercy of the Savior. Our spirits will be contrite—filled with desire to submit to God’s will and to learn from Him what we must do to obtain a remission of our sins.

“If He Confess His Sins before Thee and Me . . . I Will Forgive Him”

To confess without a proper repentant attitude is merely to take another ineffectual step in the checklist of repentance. Confession is a natural response to faith and godly sorrow. When our hearts are broken and our spirits contrite, the desire to set things right will lead us to follow the Spirit and turn away from groping for the letter of the law.

One contribution of the Book of Mormon to an understanding of the doctrine of repentance is its confirmation of the role of confession to the Lord and to proper priesthood leaders. The Lord instructed Alma that “whosoever transgresseth against me, him shall ye judge according to the sins which he has committed; and if he confess his sins before *thee* and *me*, and repenteth in the sincerity of his heart, him shall *ye* forgive, and I will forgive him also” (Mosiah 26:29; emphasis added). From Alma’s account we learn that there are two types of confession and two types of forgiveness. In this dispensation the Lord has reaffirmed this important principle (see D&C 59:12). Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained the significance of these two types of confession: “There are thus two confessions and two sources of forgiveness. A sinner must always confess all sins, great and small, to the Lord; in addition, any sins involving moral turpitude and any serious sins for which a person might be disfellowshipped or excommunicated must also be confessed to the Lord’s agent, who in most instances is the bishop. The bishop is empowered to forgive sins as far as the church is concerned, meaning that he can choose to retain the repentant person in full fellowship and not impose court penalties upon him. Ultimate forgiveness in all instances and for all sins comes from the Lord and from the Lord only.”⁷

The Lord does not require confession as a part of repentance to humiliate, embarrass, or cause one to feel punished by a vindictive God. Neither is confession a mere disclosure of deeds. It is, rather, an opportunity to covenant with the Lord that we are turning away from sin and will make the necessary adjustments in our lives. Confession without a solemn commitment to change does not guarantee any enduring effects. When we understand how “faith unto repentance”

and confession are related, we recognize that confession is provided by a merciful and loving Savior to impart the inspired counsel, comfort, and direction that is only available from the Lord and His authorized servants. When we “cast our burdens upon the Lord” through complete confession and a commitment to forsake sin, we are in a position to be taught by the Master. His guidance far surpasses any emotional lift or well-meant advice from mere mortals. “And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. . . . And my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27). The spiritual motivation to confess, characterized in the Book of Mormon as “willful submission to the Lord,” will prompt the transgressor to approach the Lord and the proper priesthood leader, as necessary, in humble confession to receive His counsel and support. Under such conditions, the necessary *action* of confession as taught by Alma, as a fruit of the *attitude* of confession, as taught by King Benjamin, becomes a blessing rather than a burden.

FORSAKING SIN

The Book of Mormon illustrates and confirms what is plainly taught in other scriptures, both ancient and modern, that confession must be accompanied by the forsaking of sin. Forsaking sin is all too often misunderstood to mean that one merely stops committing the particular sin of which he is repenting. The abandonment of that sin is necessary and is certainly one element of forsaking, but to view the scriptural concept of forsaking sin only by this narrow definition may rob us of a complete perspective of the true nature of repentance. The Book of Mormon teaches that forsaking requires the abandonment of sinfulness in every aspect of our lives and character. Without this broader application, forsaking is fragmented, and real, enduring change eludes us. One cannot merely forsake a specific sin or sinful situation and cling tenaciously to other sins. It is not just the stopping of a sinful practice that is required. What is needed is a change in one's disposition and desire for sin.

The Book of Mormon gives numerous examples of how forsaking sin, in the truest sense, brings about a total transformation of one's life. King Lamoni's father understood forsaking sin to be an element of genuine repentance when he declared: "I will give away *all my sins* to know thee . . . and be saved at the last day" (Alma 22:18; emphasis added). His forsaking of sin was not selective but rather a total surrender. This comprehensive view of forsaking sin was articulated by President Joseph F. Smith: "True repentance is not only sorrow for sins, and humble penitence and contrition before God, but it involves the necessity of turning away from them, *a discontinuance of all evil practices and deeds*, a thorough reformation of life, a vital change from evil to good, from vice to virtue, from darkness to light."⁸

Forsaking sin and confessing sin each require a change of attitude and behavior. It is not just the abandonment of an action—it is the changing of one's entire being. Alma described this mortal metamorphosis as a "mighty change in your hearts," which causes a person to "sing the song of redeeming love" (see Alma 5:14, 26). Such forsaking, as an indicator of true repentance, involves a mighty change of one's heart—one's desires and deeds—and a mighty change of direction and devotion.

A "Mighty Change" of Heart

The Lord has promised that if we will indeed abandon our wicked deeds and desires, He will perform a great miracle in our behalf that will bring about a newness of attitude, character, and being. He has promised to create in us "a new heart and a new spirit" (Ezekiel 18:31). The Lamanite prophet Samuel held up the works of the repentant and faithful Lamanites as an example to the wicked Nephites of the miracle of a new heart that occurs through "faith unto repentance." He explained that his Lamanite brethren had been "led to believe the holy scriptures, yea, the prophecies of the holy prophets, which are written, which leadeth them to faith on the Lord, and unto repentance, *which faith and repentance bringeth a change of heart unto them*" (Helaman 15:7; emphasis added). This mighty change of behavior, thoughts, attitudes, and desires comes as a merciful gift of grace—"after all we can

do” (2 Nephi 25:23). When we have demonstrated our faith, repentant determination, and renewed devotion, then the indispensable grace of God is what brings about a remission of sins.

True repentance, as taught in the Book of Mormon, is a demanding process, and once we have committed ourselves to it, there can be no hesitation. We must not attempt to straddle the line of demarcation between good and evil. We cannot, figuratively speaking, have one hand reaching for the fruit of the “tree of life” while continuing to dance and dine in the “great and spacious building,” for it requires both hands and our whole heart and soul to cling to the rod of iron (see 1 Nephi 11:8–36). The examples of individuals in the Book of Mormon who were transformed through their “faith unto repentance” make it clear that we must do all that we can as mortals to become totally “new creatures.”

A “Mighty Change” of Direction and Devotion

Forsaking sin involves not only a turning *from* evil practices but also a turning *to* God in greater righteousness and service. Just as Paul taught King Agrippa that repentance means to “turn to God, and do works meet for repentance” (Acts 26:20), so the Book of Mormon teaches that repentance requires actions that demonstrate renewed love for God and increased commitment to a life of righteousness. The resulting “works meet for repentance” are naturally two-directional—we cannot demonstrate greater love and worship of God without also gaining an intensified desire to serve and bless the lives of others. Alma taught that the covenants associated with baptism for the remission of sins require devotion on our part to both God and our fellowmen (see Mosiah 18:8–10).

Increased devotion to God. Alma taught his people at the waters of Mormon that the covenant of baptism for the remission of sins involves a commitment, or solemn promise, to God “that ye will serve him and keep his commandments” (Mosiah 18:10). Writing to his son Moroni, Mormon taught that “fulfilling the commandments [of God] bringeth remission of sins” (Moroni 8:25). King Benjamin taught his people that for them to *obtain* and *retain* a remission of their sins, they must

continue “calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith,” and “grow[ing] in the knowledge of the glory of him that created [them]” (Mosiah 4:11–12). King Benjamin further pointed out that our renewed devotion toward God would also affect our relationships with our fellowmen. “And ye will not have a mind to injure one another,” he declared, “but to live peaceably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due” (Mosiah 4:13).

Increased love and service to our fellowmen. Alma taught that if we truly desire to have the heavy burden of sin lifted from our weary shoulders, we must be “willing to bear one another’s burdens” and be “willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:8–9). King Benjamin declared, “When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17). In all of the standard works, there is perhaps no more profound example of how service and love of others flow naturally out of true repentance than the story of the sons of Mosiah. Before their remarkable conversion these young men were, according to the scriptural record, “the very vilest of sinners” (Mosiah 28:4). Because of the sincerity of their repentance and the intensity of their faith in and gratitude for the Atonement of Christ, they were later “zealously striving to repair all the injuries which they had done to the church, confessing all their sins, and publishing all the things which they had seen, and explaining the prophecies and the scriptures to all who desired to hear them.

“And thus they were instruments in the hands of God in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth. . . .

“Now they were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature” (Mosiah 27:35–36; 28:3; see also Helaman 5:17).

The subsequent lives of righteousness and service of the sons of Mosiah are evidence that true repentance prompted them to make a spiritual restitution for their sins. While it is true that we can in no way, of ourselves, repay the Savior, make full restitution for our sins, or overcome our sinfulness by our efforts alone, we can show our appreciation for His sacrifice by making a spiritual restitution through a lifelong devotion to God and to our fellowmen. Although we will continue to

be “unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:21), if we truly have “faith unto repentance,” we will strive to follow the example of the sons of Mosiah, who spent their lives “zealously striving to repair all the injuries” caused by their sins.

“I HAVE REPENTED OF MY SINS; . . . BEHOLD I AM BORN OF THE SPIRIT”

The Book of Mormon constantly reminds us that repentance is inextricably linked with faith in Christ and that forgiveness of sins comes as a gift of God’s grace to man only upon condition of “faith unto repentance.” Even though we may diligently work to confess and forsake our sins, we cannot of ourselves attain the “mighty change of heart.” Our own efforts, however noble, if not by-products of faith in the Savior, will produce only an incomplete or temporary change of life. President Benson wrote that many in the world “demonstrate great willpower and self-discipline in overcoming bad habits and weaknesses of the flesh. Yet at the same time they give no thought to the Master, sometimes even openly rejecting Him. Such changes of behavior, even if in a positive direction, do not constitute true repentance.”⁹

Like those spoken of by President Benson, we often struggle mightily, even with the best of intentions, trying to overcome our carnal ways through our own efforts. We may feel overwhelmed, frustrated, and hopeless, unable to change when we rely solely on our puny human willpower. We can never achieve a remission of sins in that way. The spiritual rebirth that purges sin from our soul, of which the Book of Mormon repeatedly speaks, comes only as gift of the Spirit—made possible only through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Alma declared, “I have repented of my sins, and have been redeemed of the Lord; behold I am born of the Spirit” (Mosiah 27:24). The Book of Mormon shows us the means whereby we, after we have done “all we can do,” may know that we have been “born of the Spirit” and have received a forgiveness of our sins. The words and lives of Enos, King Benjamin, Alma, Helaman, Lamoni, and others, provide us with valuable insights into what one feels and does when he is cleansed by the atoning blood of Christ.

Peace of Conscience

One most significant indicator of forgiveness, described in the Book of Mormon, is found in Enos's declaration upon hearing the Lord assure him that his sins were forgiven: "My guilt was swept away" (Enos 1:6). Approximately four centuries after Enos, King Benjamin's people experienced similar feelings after their prayer of penitence (see Mosiah 4:2). The scriptural record recounts the miraculous spiritual rebirth that effected a remission of their sins and was accompanied by a "peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ" (Mosiah 4:3).

Unfortunately, some people have mistakenly equated a "peace of conscience" with an elimination of the memory of sins. They feel that they are not forgiven as long as they continue to remember their past misdeeds. The Book of Mormon helps to dispel this myth and to clarify what is meant by a "peace of conscience." It is obvious from Alma's record that he could vividly remember his sins as he counseled his sons a generation later. He described his relief upon receiving a remission of his sins: "I could remember my pains no more; . . . I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more" (Alma 36:19). Although he could continue to remember his sins and even the pain that he had suffered, his conscience was no longer tortured by guilt.

Joy and Divine Love

Another indicator of forgiveness of sins often cited in Book of Mormon conversion experiences is that of an overwhelming feeling of joy and love. "And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold," declared Alma, "yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!" (Alma 36:20). The miraculous conversion of King Lamoni and his wife also resulted in the feeling of joy and love that accompanies forgiveness and spiritual rebirth. As the queen arose from her overpowering spiritual experience, she declared: "O blessed Jesus, who has saved me from an awful hell!" (Alma 19:29). The record continues: "And when she had said this, she clasped her hands, being filled with joy" (Alma 19:30). The people of King Benjamin experienced something similar when they penitently petitioned God for His mercy

and forgiveness. The scriptures record that “the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins” (Mosiah 4:3).

Although we may not be so totally overcome by the Spirit that we fall to the earth in a spiritual trance, like Lamoni and his wife (see Alma 19:13, 18), we can feel “exquisite joy” like Alma and Benjamin’s people. Associated with this increased sense of joy is also an intensified awareness of divine love. Alma characterized that feeling as a desire to “sing the song of redeeming love” (Alma 5:26).

No Desire for Sin

Another important testament of the spiritual transformation that brings with it forgiveness of sins is a “mighty change” in our disposition and desires. King Benjamin’s people experienced this fruit of repentance and joyfully declared: “The Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent . . . 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” (Mosiah 5:2). King Lamoni, his wife, and all those who were converted through Ammon’s ministrations to the king also testified “that their hearts had been changed; that they had no more desire to do evil” (Alma 19:33). Similarly, Alma spoke of high priests whose “garments were washed white through the blood of the Lamb” and who subsequently “could not look upon sin save it were with abhorrence” (Alma 13:11–12).

We, like these ancient Book of Mormon people, can determine to a degree when we have been forgiven and to what extent we have been spiritually reborn by examining our disposition toward evil and our desires “to do good continually.” This condition does not mean that we never again succumb to temptation, but it does mean that sinfulness becomes repugnant to us and that we desire righteousness and seek to do good.

Love for Our Fellowmen

When we are forgiven of our sins and feel an intensified love and appreciation for the Lord, a natural outgrowth of those feelings is a desire that our fellowmen also experience the goodness and mercy of

God. In Lehi's dream, after he had partaken of the fruit of the tree of life, which filled his soul with inexpressible joy, he declared, "I began to be desirous that my family should partake of it also" (1 Nephi 8:12). Enos also exemplified this attitude when, after the Lord had assured him that his sins were forgiven, his compassion and concern extended beyond himself to his brethren the Nephites, and even to his enemies the Lamanites (see Enos 1:9–13). We see this fruit of forgiveness in the declaration of Alma: "I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost" (Alma 36:24). If we desire to know whether our repentance is accepted of the Lord, we should take spiritual inventory of our feelings of concern for others and our involvement in compassionate service.

Increased Spiritual Understanding

King Benjamin's people witnessed that accompanying the remission of their sins came "the manifestations of his Spirit" and "great views of that which is to come" (Mosiah 5:3). When we are truly penitent, we are prepared to have the Holy Ghost teach and testify to us of the "mysteries of God" (Alma 26:22). Thus another fruit of forgiveness, as seen in the Book of Mormon, is renewed guidance by the Holy Ghost, a greater understanding and yearning for spiritual things, and an increased spiritual discernment of the things of God.

God's Image Engraven upon Our Countenances

Speaking to the Church in Zarahemla, Alma posed a simple, yet significant, question to the Saints regarding the level of their spiritual transformation: "Have ye received [God's] image in your countenances?" (Alma 5:14). Perhaps Alma was referring to the literal, visible change that comes upon a person whose sins are forgiven and whose countenance is illuminated by the Spirit of the Lord, but he was probably also alluding to the inward transformation of the whole being. By "countenance" Alma probably meant our whole being: our bearing,

manner, behavior, and appearance. In other words, do our actions “image” or reflect those of the Savior?¹⁰

BECOMING A “NEW CREATURE” IN CHRIST: EVENT OR PROCESS?

Most examples in the Book of Mormon of women and men whose sins were forgiven and who experienced spiritual rebirth involve dramatic or almost sensational events. Enos, Alma the Younger, King Lamoni and his wife, and King Benjamin’s people all underwent a sudden change of heart during a singular event or experience. But what about us? Will each of us experience this cleansing spiritual regeneration in the same manner? Elder McConkie answered: “A person may get converted in a moment, miraculously. . . . But that is not the way it happens to most people. With most people, conversion [and the accompanying remission of sins] is a process; and it goes step by step, degree by degree, level by level, from a lower state to a higher, from grace to grace, until the time that the individual is wholly turned to the cause of righteousness. Now this means that an individual overcomes one sin today and another sin tomorrow. He perfects his life in one field now, and in another field later on. And the process goes on until it is complete, until we become, literally, as the Book of Mormon says, saints of God instead of natural men.”¹¹

Even in the Book of Mormon, most of the people who exercised faith, repented of their sins, and kept the commandments received a remission of their sins through a gradual process rather than a singular event (see Helaman 3:35, Moroni 8:25–26).

President Benson counseled us not to become discouraged by expecting the sensational or by comparing our experiences with those of others. “We must be careful, as we seek to become more and more godlike, that we do not become discouraged and lose hope. Becoming Christlike is a lifetime pursuit and very often involves growth and change that is slow, almost imperceptible.”¹²

Through Book of Mormon and other ancient and modern prophets, the Lord continues to extend an invitation to all mankind to come unto Him, the Physician of men’s souls, and be healed spiritually. All who

desire to be clean, to have the heavy burden of sin lifted, and to once again feel God's divine approbation may receive the miracle of forgiveness if they will but approach the Savior with "faith unto repentance." "Come unto Christ, who is the Holy One of Israel," wrote Amaleki as he closed the book of Omni, "and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption. Yea, come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him, and continue in fasting and praying, and endure to the end; and as the Lord liveth ye will be saved" (Omni 1:26). Alma, who spoke not only as a prophet but also from his own miraculous experience, often reiterated the Lord's injunction to repent and partake of the blessings of forgiveness:

"Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you.

"Yea, he saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely" (Alma 5:33–34).

And finally, Alma gives us this promise, which epitomizes the central message of the Book of Mormon: "Therefore, whosoever repenteth, and hardeneth not his heart, he shall have claim on mercy through mine Only Begotten Son, unto a remission of his sins; and these shall enter into my rest" (Alma 12:34).

NOTES

1. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 194.

2. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 71.

3. Orson Pratt, "True Faith," *A Series of Pamphlets by Orson Pratt* (Liverpool: Franklin D. Richards, 1852), 5–6; in *A Compilation Containing the Lectures on Faith*, comp. N. B. Lundwall (Salt Lake City: N. B. Lundwall, 1940), 76–77.

4. Orson Pratt, "True Repentance," *A Series of Pamphlets by Orson Pratt*

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(Liverpool: Franklin D. Richards, 1852), 30–31; republished in *Orson Pratt: Writings of an Apostle* (Salt Lake City: Mormon Heritage Publishers, 1976).

5. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1953), 13.

6. Neal A. Maxwell, *“Not My Will, but Thine”* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 92–93.

7. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 236.

8. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 100.

9. Benson, *Teachings*, 71.

10. For a more extensive discussion of this interpretation of Alma 5:14 and the meanings of such words as “image,” “engraven,” and “countenance,” see Andrew F. Skinner, “Alma’s ‘Pure Testimony,’” in *Studies in Scripture, volume 7, 1 Nephi to Alma 29*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 301.

11. Bruce R. McConkie, address at Brigham Young University First Stake Conference, 11 February 1968; in Brent L. Top, *“Though Your Sins Be As Scarlet”* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 122.

12. Benson, *Teachings*, 72.