

The Infinite Atonement:

From Temporal Mindset to Eternal Vision

Carol Stewart

Brad Wilcox

Religion 250

Christ and His Everlasting Gospel

October 19, 2024

The Infinite Atonement:

From Temporal Mindset to Eternal Vision

Carol Stewar

A phrase I repeated throughout my mission was “Sacrifice brings blessings.”¹ This always seemed like an easy concept—one I felt I had grasped at an early age. It simply means that obedience rewards us with blessings and will help us enjoy our mortal “journey”² a little more. In other words, if we are obedient, we will “prosper in the land.”³ And vice versa, if we aren’t obedient and don’t make wise choices, we will feel sad and have a more difficult time in life. And for the early years of my life, this concept held true, from Primary right up through being a missionary. However, post-mission, I found that I didn’t quite understand this “simple concept” as well as I thought I had. Life is not simple; life is hard, and the formula of the divine economy is not predictable. Fortunately for all of us, the power of the Atonement and the love of God can fill all of life’s voids and provide peace when peace is not humanly possible.

I remember clearly in my youth, as I was attending Primary, then Sunday School, and eventually Young Women classes, I often read and heard references to scriptures and quotes by General Authorities in our lessons that seemed to share the formula for happiness and success in life, which is close to this partial quote from a talk given by Hartmon Rector Jr. in General Conference of 1974: “In this earth-life probation, those who are converted will succeed.”⁴ This seemed like easy math to me: $A + B = C$.

This equation continued to add up as a missionary. In one of our apartments, we even had a sign hanging that said, “Sacrifice Brings Blessings,” reminding us that as missionaries we were there sacrificing, and therefore we could expect miracles. Like most missionaries, we prayed for mission

miracles with our proselytizing, our district and zone, for ourselves, our companions, those we were teaching, for our loved ones at home, and countless goals we wanted to achieve. Miracles were brought to the feet of my companions and me as we saw many individuals and families be converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ through His words. We were obedient missionaries, and we did “prosper in the land.”

As a missionary, I learned that I had been trying to face significant struggles with depression! I had been experiencing a sadness I didn’t recognize until I was serving. This overwhelming sadness was not from sin or feeling homesick, but it was a depression that came through genetics and compounded by traumas I carried deep within. I felt a separation from the overall ability to experience joy in life. I often had a feeling as though I was peering through a window, watching others laugh and engage in life while a heavy, dark cloud loomed overhead. I always think of Eeyore from *Winnie the Pooh* when trying to explain this feeling.⁵ This burden felt suffocating, like being trapped in a dense fog that blocked joy and light. I kept telling myself to try harder; to do better. I assumed that I was doing something wrong. I was experiencing depression even before my feet had even landed in Connecticut. However, I didn’t know I could experience life in a better way.

Gratefully, through inspiration, I was guided to a doctor in the area where I was serving. He gave me the time needed to explain my background and what I was feeling. He listened, made an assessment, and then prescribed a small dose of medication that helped to get my brain synapses firing in a healthier way. The meeting with the doctor was then followed by a priesthood blessing. After these experiences and with some time and continued perseverance in combination with my faith and trust in the Lord, I began to enjoy my mission much more.

It was also during this time that I was enlightened about a particular passage of scripture that a member shared with me. This scripture has had a life-long impact in my life, and it is one of my go-to scriptures when I am feeling blue and need to feel my Savior's love. The scripture she shared was Alma 7:11-12. ⁶ These verses highlight the vastness of the Atonement. She pointed out the beginning of verse 11, "And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind," and the last part of verse 12, "...according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities."

In addition to being blessed with loving mission presidents who guided me along those eighteen months, I enjoyed an amazing spiritual transformation because of the blessing and occasion to read, study, pray, teach, learn, serve, love, and make friends more than at any other time in my life. The miracle I needed as a missionary came from a combination of inspiration, science, loving members, and the power of the Atonement; I just didn't know it yet. As I continued as a missionary, I learned deeper truths about the Atonement of Jesus Christ. As we found and taught those who were prepared to hear about our Savior, His purpose here on Earth, and the blessing of eternal life, it became a source of joy, learning, and growth for my own testimony.

My progress in the gospel helped me better understand Jesus' sacrifice—not only the pain and sickness He felt but also the emotional and spiritual sorrows we all have had and will have. Through His Atonement, He came to understand how we feel perfectly. This new knowledge changed things for me. I knew He suffered for our sins but learning that He can help us through *everything* we feel, and He can help us endure through everything we face, even when, or especially when, we do not understand the "why" behind the pain, has helped my gratitude for the Savior grow immensely. This understanding has made all the difference in how I studied, taught, lived and understood the blessing of the Atonement from that point on.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell says it best: “Jesus' perfect empathy was ensured when, along with His Atonement for our sins, He took upon Himself our sicknesses, sorrows, griefs, and infirmities and came to know these "according to the flesh.” He did this in order that He might be filled with perfect, personal mercy and empathy and thereby know how to succor us in our infirmities. He thus fully comprehends human suffering.”⁷

I also find this other quote from Elder Neal A. Maxwell helpful: “The valiant among us keep moving forward anyway, because they know the Lord loves them, even when they “do not know the meaning of all things.”⁸ As a missionary, I never stopped trying to be obedient and striving to work hard throughout my time serving. And even though it was very hard sometimes, and I didn't understand various disappointments, I knew it was important for me to finish what Jesus had called me to do. Boyd K. Packer once said, “We are not obedient because we are blind; we are obedient because we can see.”⁹ I am so grateful for seeing the blessings that come from the Savior's Atoning sacrifice.

Since I have returned home from my mission (thirty-one years ago), the blessings and “miracles” I was so used to seeing as a missionary have not been as obvious and consistently delivered. My obedience did not bring a perfect family situation, nor blessings of health and healing from my annoying ailments. I have not won the lottery; Ed McMann has not knocked on my door and handed me a ‘big check’ granting me unlimited wealth.¹⁰ At times it has felt like I have received the opposite of “blessings” from the heavens above. And not receiving the blessings I was used to seeing at a more predictable pace made me feel like my life was a failure and I was accomplishing nothing.

The phrase “proper in the land” is mentioned several times in the Book of Mormon. For example, “...Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of

promise.”¹¹ For many years of my life, the terms “success” and “prosper” were interchangeable. Unfortunately, I had been interpreting success or prospering in this life to mean that through our obedience we would enjoy material wealth, prayers would be answered promptly, and except for some choices or trials of our faith (which we agreed to and accepted in the pre-existence), we would be blessed or compensated instantly.

Based on several conversations with others throughout the years, I have not been alone in relying on the equation $A + B = C$. We believed in the literal sense of this simple statement. If we are obedient and make good choices, Heavenly Father will bless us. Many of us felt we were taught that if we obeyed the commandments, we would always be “healthy, wealthy, and wise.”¹² We believed this simple statement referred to *all* things, including secular outcomes.

The years I spent believing in and relying on that notion were very confusing. Even while reading my patriarchal blessing, I have experienced disappointment and wondered why the promised blessings were not coming on the timetable. I felt the blessings were pronounced. It didn’t matter how much I served, prayed, obeyed, and gave; I wasn’t seeing answers to prayers, or I should say I *couldn’t* see answers to my prayers.

During some especially hard times, I received inspiration that has brought me peace and a better understanding of how life in God’s plan works. I remembered that when serving as a missionary we defined success by conversions. We were prosperous when setting and achieving goals with our service hours, bringing people to church, teaching a certain number of lessons, identifying the Spirit, witnessing the truth to someone who had never felt that type of joy before, and recognizing our ability to memorize and recite scripture passages and gospel principles. These missionary prospering experiences were the type of “prosperity” referred to in The Book of Mormon. The intention and type of “success” documented in the Book of Mormon did not seem to be being

taught properly by my teachers, or so I felt. Maybe thousands of us heard it wrong for years and years, or maybe we all just didn't understand it like we do now? Whatever the case, the success being taught in scripture always included blessings of comfort in not only spiritual ways but in physical ways as well. However, the true definition of success in God's plan for us is quite different.

Praying to the Lord and asking Him to provide us with secular blessings and then giving the Lord a narrow time frame is not part of The Plan of Happiness. That mindset is one that can hinder our eternal progression. It is the opposite of everything that Christ taught. Elder D. Todd Christofferson explained this way of thinking perfectly in General Conference 2022,

“Some misunderstand the promises of God to mean that obedience to Him yields specific outcomes on a fixed schedule. They might think, “If I diligently serve a full-time mission, God will bless me with a happy marriage and children,” or “If I refrain from doing schoolwork on the Sabbath, God will bless me with good grades,” or “If I pay tithing, God will bless me with that job I’ve been wanting.” If life doesn’t fall out precisely this way or according to an expected timetable, they may feel betrayed by God. But things are not so mechanical in the divine economy. We ought not to think of God’s plan as a cosmic vending machine...”¹³

I am still not clear how my mind was able to accept the idea of “expecting” blessings, because I have known from a very young age that we don't deserve anything. Heavenly Father has already blessed us with far more than all our obedience deserves. And the most valuable thing we have in our challenging lives is the guiding light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Knowing that everything we need to know for eternal improvement has again been provided for each of through revelation to prophets called and prepared before the world was and the restoration of God's church, covenants and ordinances.

I now know that it is imperative to gain a testimony of the true purpose of life and how blessings come to us, both here on earth and after we have died. There is nothing more important than

participating in this plan, made possible through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. One of the most important blessings available to us is the companionship of Spirit to help confirm our faith and hope, and to be a constant companion when the world feels cold and lonely. I also know Jesus is waiting for us to use our agency and reach out and take His hand and allow Him to lead us along the way.

Life is made to be a bit bumpy at times, and very rocky at other times. However, we have been blessed with the things that we need to learn, grow, and prove ourselves worthy to live in a celestial world. The blessing of repentance and the opportunity to take full advantage of the Atonement of our Lord and Savior is a priceless, loving tool we have been given. It is infinite and eternal. As we proactively seek to repent and invoke the guidance of the Holy Ghost, we will feel the point where justice and mercy meet, and eventually feel the desire for worldly accomplishments or success to no longer be the focus of our sightline.

We are here on earth to learn and grow and become disciples of Christ and we need to become “all in.” C.S. Lewis said this, “Christ says, ‘Give me All. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don’t want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. . . . Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.’”¹⁴

It is not unreasonable to ask for guidance, pursue and education, earn money, and live our best lives while here on earth. However, nothing should come before The Savior and our commitment to Him. I love this description of how much more we have than just our earthly possessions from Elder Haight when he was referring to what he and his wife had when starting their lives together: “When Ruby and I were married in Salt Lake City and going on our honeymoon across Nevada to a new job in Berkeley, California, we had all our earthly possessions in the rumble seat of a little

Ford A, a one-seated car. Those early possessions were our clothes and some wedding gifts. The rest was an opportunity.”¹⁵

Elder and Sister Haight had their whole lives ahead of them as they headed to Berkely and very little else. However, I love the term “opportunity” he used to describe his future. This word included all things physical, spiritual, emotional, and eternal. Elder Haight accomplished many different things both in the business world, with his family, and within the church. He loved his wife, and he always gave her a “shout-out” to include her in her talks. It was very endearing.

This same term applies to the Atonement, works perfectly to describe what we have been given by the Savior. The opportunities are endless for us when it comes to progression, strengthening our testimony, knowing more about our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, learning how to “hear” and interpret the Spirit better. We have everything in our favor. However, we must remember to use the principle of repentance and forgiveness for everything to work together “successfully.” And we need to remember that the power of the Atonement is not limited to only being forgiven.

Envision repentance as a magnificent hot air balloon, filled with the potential for great heights. This balloon is constantly fueled by the flame of God's unconditional love, which provides the lift necessary for our spiritual ascent. However, we often find ourselves tethered to the ground by the cords of sin, distractions, hard times, and are unable to rise despite being filled with this divine energy. Our task as individuals is to allow the power of the Atonement to liberate ourselves from these restraints and cut the cords that keep us earthbound. Each act of repentance or frequent prayer to our Heavenly Father can be likened to severing one of these cords, allowing us to ascend incrementally. Holding onto sin keeps us tied down, preventing us from exploring the vast spiritual possibilities that lie ahead.

The Savior and His infinite Atonement serve as our guide and support throughout this journey. Like a skilled balloonist, He helps us identify the constraints that anchor us and teaches us how to release them. With His assistance, we can rise above the sandbags of sin that Satan employs to keep us grounded, defying the gravitational pull of our mortal condition. Engaging fully in the process of repentance allows us to soar to new heights, unveiling a newer and clearer landscape of opportunities for growth and service that were previously hidden.

This journey of ascent is not without its challenges. We may encounter turbulence or moments of fear as we navigate beyond our comfort zones. Yet, with each obstacle we overcome through His grace and with each sin we abandon through repentance, we will feel lighter, more agile, and better prepared to handle life's next challenges in our unique plan back home to Him. The Atonement must become the lift beneath our spiritual wings, propelling us forward in our eternal progression. It transforms us from earthbound beings into celestial explorers, capable of achieving heights that are impossible with Him. As we continue to repent and draw upon the power of the Atonement, we discover that our balloon doesn't merely rise—it soars where only He can take us.

And God's children are meant to soar, especially in our time. We have everything right at our fingertips. We can do it if we remember to rely on our Savior, and if we learn to love and help one another on the path as we learn to love more like He loves us. I am all in, and I am very grateful for the love of my Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, and I am grateful for how better understanding the power of the Atonement has helped me understand what success in God's plan for us really means.

Notes:

¹ "Praise to the Man," *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. 27.

² Monson, Thomas S. "Finding Joy in the Journey." *Liahona*, November 2008.
<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2008/11/finding-joy-in-the-journey?lang=eng#title1>.

³ Mosiah 2: 22

⁴ Hartman Rector Jr., "The Strength of Testimony," *General Conference*, April 1974, 109.

⁵ *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*. Directed by John Lounsbery and Wolfgang Reitherman. Walt Disney Productions, 1977.

⁶ Alma 7: 11-12

⁷ Neal A. Maxwell, "Enduring Well," *Ensign*, Apr. 1997, p. 7

⁸ Neal A. Maxwell, *General Conference*, April 2001, 59; Neal A. Maxwell, "Plow in Hope," *Ensign*, May 2001, 59; see also 1 Nephi 11:17.

⁹ Boyd K Packer, 1983

¹⁰ American Family Publishers." *Wikipedia*. Last modified October 18, 2024.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Family_Publishers..

¹¹ 1 Nephi 4:14

¹² See Lorenzo Snow, "Discourse," *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 18 (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1876), 376; see also "Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise," in *The Children's Songbook of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 280.

¹³ Christofferson, D. Todd. "Our Relationship with God." *General Conference*, April 2022,
<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2022/04/45christofferson>.

"We ought not to think of God's plan as a cosmic vending machine where we (1) select a desired blessing, (2) insert the required sum of good works, and (3) the order is promptly delivered (Christofferson, 2022). King Benjamin taught that all God requires of us is to keep His commandments, "for which if ye do, he doth immediately bless you" (Mosiah 2:22, 24). This does not mean, however, that all blessings come quickly. God's blessings are immediate in that His commandments carry their own reward and bring the blessing of His Spirit's presence by having His Holy Spirit with us (Alma 36:30).

"God will indeed honor His covenants and promises to each of us. We need not worry about that (Doctrine and Covenants 82:10). The atoning power of Jesus Christ—who descended below all things and then ascended on high (Doctrine and Covenants 88:6) and who possesses all power in heaven and in earth (Matthew 28:18)—ensures that God can and will fulfill His promises. It is essential that we honor and obey His laws, but not every blessing predicated on obedience to law (Doctrine and Covenants 130:20–21) is shaped, designed, and timed according to our expectations. We do our best but must leave to Him the management of blessings, both temporal and spiritual (Christofferson, 2022)."

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1960), 167.

¹⁵ David B. Haight, "Carried by Our Covenants," *BYU Women's Conference*, May 2, 2003,
<https://womensconference.ce.byu.edu/sites/womensconference.ce.byu.edu/files/elderdavidbhaight.pdf>.