

Making the Gospel Relevant—A Case for Coming unto Christ

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Context

How to make the Savior's atonement more personal and compelling by adding substantive meaning and definition to the abstraction of sin. Both 'sin' and 'perfection' can be measurably defined from God's fundamental perspective. Only one measurement of perfection matters to God on a daily basis: To believe Him and to disbelieve the father of lies. This clarity leads us to a realistic and attainable way to fulfill the divine expectation to be spotless on a daily basis, and removes unrealistic and imagined pressures from what we may think others expect of us. By removing artificial pressures we can measure up perfectly every day, and with the benefit of the sacrament, to continue the lifelong journey toward being made complete, whole and perfect in Christ.

Overview

Why do we need the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our lives? Many people think that because God is a just God, our punishment must be proportional to our crimes. "If a just God is going to beat me for the few minor things I have done, then it can't be too bad",¹ or "If I am essentially a good person—at least better than that other hypocrite—then I don't need a *church* to teach me to be good." Or alternatively, "I am strong enough that I don't need a spiritual crutch to lean on."

The Gospel provides the means to correct *our wrong choice of master*. It is not about crutches or individual strength or what we think is fair. We need the Gospel because justice is *not* about proportionality of crime and punishment; rather it is about accountability to the consequences of our choices.² We can choose to accept God as our Master and follow His plan, or we can reject God and follow Lucifer. When we have chosen a master and his path, he *owns* us,³ and can do with us whatever pleases him, regardless of what *we* think is just or fair.⁴ If we are not on God's path, it is Lucifer who will be punishing us for our sins.⁵ *The Gospel provides the miraculous means to recant our decision to stray from God's path.*⁶

Sin should not be an Abstract Concept

What fundamentally constitutes sin or imperfection? We tend to put undue pressure on ourselves to meet an imagined standard of perfection. Is imperfection defined as failing to meet some perceived expectation of a neighbor, spouse, child or parent? Or is a sin determined by whether we have previously offended a person, or defied some arbitrary policy or broken some civic law? If these were how sin is always judged, then Jesus would not have lived an unblemished life. *If either sin or perfection were based on any measure relative to human expectations, then Jesus would not have been worthy to consummate the atonement.* Offended critics easily find scriptural examples of Him breaking the Sabbath, subverting social authorities, engaging in politically incorrect name calling, destroying public and private property, and—by pre-meditated violence in a public temple—inciting a riot. There were those in His time who found Him worthy of death because of such perceptions and rationalizations.

But the self-interested and fickle opinions of scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites and all others are irrelevant to Jesus' stature before God. Jesus *did* live a perfect life. He *was* worthy to

be the spotless Lamb of God. So if those actions did not constitute *sin*, then perhaps we need to look for a different definition of sin—a concrete, measurable definition so clear that even Satan is obligated to adhere to it. And while we are at it, we should seek a means by which we can follow Jesus in remaining spotless before God on a daily basis. After all, He did command us to be perfect.⁷ Will we rationalize that the Lord gives any commandment that fundamentally cannot be obeyed?⁸ Consider the following three case studies from God's perspective that help us to understand the basic nature of sin.

Case Studies Demonstrating the Primal⁹ Sin

When Jesus began His ministry with an extended fast, the tempter came to Him¹⁰ with a seemingly innocuous suggestion to turn stones into bread. If Jesus had done so, what about that situation would have been a sin? Was He capable of the act? Yes, because at the occasion of the wedding He turned water into wine at His mother's request. We deduce what the tempter was trying to achieve from Jesus' response: *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.* The key issue was not what Jesus was being asked to do, but rather who was doing the asking. The message Satan should have heard was, "I will not consider doing what you tell me to do. I am not going to listen to you, let alone believe or even converse with you. I am ONLY going to listen to my Father and obey Him." It would have been a sinful act of betrayal for Jesus to believe *let alone hearken* to the father of lies¹¹ no matter what Satan was peddling, whether satisfaction, sovereignty or glory!¹² The important conclusion is that *for Jesus, perfection was continuously maintained on a daily basis by perfectly believing and obeying God,¹³ and by perfectly disbelieving and ignoring the eternal adversary and enemy of all truth.* Understanding these definitions, even we can fulfill the Savior's commandment to be perfectly spotless day-to-day, even as we work over a lifetime to become completely *perfected in Christ.*¹⁴

Another case study is found in our circumstances before we came to this earth. Our spirits were in the presence of God. We knew Him intimately and loved Him as Father. Each and every individual human belonging to this earth chose to believe Him. Yet we had countless spirit brothers and sisters whom we also loved, and these turned their backs on Him, disbelieved Him and betrayed Him to follow Lucifer. These were rendered captive by the doubt and fear instilled by Lucifer, willfully choosing to submit themselves, rather, to that being who desired our misery and destruction. Each and every human on earth has a body and a future resurrection because we instead chose to believe our Father.

Believing God expresses a different meaning than merely believing *in* Him. Believing God is to take His words at face value and act upon them, without convolution or rationalization.¹⁵ For those who were also in His presence, knowing first-hand of His power and love and yet disbelieving and rejecting Him, betraying Him in favor of a liar—that was *unpardonable* sin. Death was their immediate and permanent consequence.¹⁶ They are forever cast away.

Our first parents had been placed in Eden where they were in the presence of God and knew His love first-hand. They were taught His commandments and the consequences of both obedience and disobedience. What about their acceptance of the forbidden fruit was sinful? In this case study, as in the cases noted above, the primal sin is in believing Lucifer's words above God's, then acting in full knowledge against the explicit commandment of God and at the behest of Lucifer. Once again, to be in the presence of

God, feel His love and goodness, hear His clear and direct commandment, then commit betrayal by turning to God's eternal adversary posing as one with wisdom to be learned, and as a master to be obeyed— this was once again a sin worthy of death.¹⁷ Lucifer became their master,¹⁸ and the individual choices once again brought the dire consequence of death.¹⁹ Each of Adam and Eve's posterity since has also disregarded God's voice at some time in our lives.²⁰ By choosing to believe Lucifer instead, we sin and also inherit death and, potentially, misery. True misery is when we die without repentance and are subject to and owned by Satan.²¹

The Nature of Lucifer and of His Punishment

When Lucifer is our master, our sins will not be punished in proportion to the magnitude of our crimes because Lucifer is neither just nor fair.²² He is instead malicious and sadistically cruel. He is envious of our to-be-resurrected bodies and even of our ability to experience sickness, sorrow and pain. For those who have subjected themselves to him, wittingly or not, Satan knows how to make each sensation most severe.

Mercy comes into play because we were not directly in the presence of God when we betrayed Him, and we therefore lacked a perfect knowledge of Him. This life is given to us as a probationary time to recognize the need for believing God, and to demonstrate which path we will actually follow. Will we accept His generous rescue offer? The Gospel of Jesus Christ is sure escape from death,²³ contingent upon two things: the mediation of Jesus Christ, and our willingness to accept the terms of His rescue invitation.²⁴

How maliciously gleeful Lucifer must have been to get our first parents to fall. He brought about a fallen world where every individual would become subject to him, giving rise to the great day of his power. How he must have looked forward in anxious anticipation to negotiating from a position of power with hostages to deal. Our loving Father *did* allow a ransom²⁵ to take place, in order to potentially exchange ownership of us from Lucifer back to God. What was the ransom price? Lucifer's wrathful, seething revenge against the very one who had cast him down.²⁶ In C.S. Lewis' allegory of The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,²⁷ the boy Edmund, representing each of us, was but a pawn for the White Witch as she attempted to gain supreme power over her arch nemesis, the creator-figure Lion. Just as Aslan the Lion willingly gave himself over as a ransom to be tortured and murdered in the stead of the doomed traitor Edmund, Christ our Savior gave himself in our behalf.²⁸ Out of extreme love for the rest of His family, Jesus would suffer Lucifer's malice instead of us.²⁹ By prior agreement, Jesus would do so submissively.³⁰ Lucifer could exact his bitter revenge from the Great Jehovah: three rounds in Gethsemane,³¹ then in the rigged courts, then at the tip of the scourge, and finally under the nails at Calvary. No fighting back. And Jesus would have to submit alone, unaided by the Father, and without supernatural powers. If Jesus failed, He too would be subject to all of the ramifications of sin.

For any who had pictured God lashing His own son in the Garden of Gethsemane, perhaps uttering all the time how “this one's for Johnny” or “this hurts me more than it hurts you”, the realization comes quickly why Satan, man of sin, would be so pleased with that long-maintained lie, masked in mystery. He had carefully painted that deceitful picture with God in the bitter, angry likeness of Satan's own character, and titled it “The Wrath of God”!³² Therefore, isn't it revealing instead to consider Satan vindictively

doing what he had longed for, practiced toward and excelled at: spitefully inflicting amassed sorrow, fatigue, pain, suffering, sickness, guilt, torment and unfathomable longing upon the brother he so loathed and even blamed for his own miserable state? Such long-smoldering malice was unleashed in torrents against Jesus, with Jesus' only defenses being His divine ability and *will* to survive. Lucifer wins if he can create such excruciating and exquisite sensations that Jesus would rather die than endure.³³ If Jesus fails to drink the bitter cup and surrenders to end His suffering, then He sins against God by choosing the will of Lucifer over the will of God. It is a gargantuan battle of infinitely imposed suffering, versus the divine attribute and gift of being able to *choose* to live or to die.³⁴ Force versus will. Compulsion versus moral agency. This is the ultimate manifestation of Jesus' moral agency: freely to obey the will of God, with a very real opportunity to *fail utterly*. If Lucifer succeeds and Jesus succumbs, then Lucifer owns Jesus and us too. *All is lost*.

Imagine when you and I were pre-mortal spirit witnesses,³⁵ watching, weeping for Him, seeing the price Jesus the Christ was advancing in our behalf! Imagine being appalled at every cruel device of torture that Lucifer used in violently attempting to cow his hated brother into preferring *death* to ultimate suffering. We were horrified beyond belief at the blood, the gore and utter brutality. We were astonished at Jesus' ability and will to endure the suffering. We prayed and watched, knowing that if Jesus failed, we ourselves must later endure those same torments.³⁶ We felt growing conviction as we watched, until our fears for ourselves faded and completely turned to empathy and love for our beloved suffering Brother. And we cheered Jesus in our hope to strengthen Him. Finally He affirmed "it is finished" when His just Father indicated the agreed price was paid in full. Only then did He willingly give up the divine ghost. We all celebrated in unspeakable joy when Jesus took up His body again and forever broke Lucifer's monopolistic reign over suffering and death.³⁷

It is Possible to Believe God Perfectly, and thus be Spotless Daily

Lucifer lost in his effort to conquer and possess Jesus. But with the most profound sadness we recognize that he yet owns many of us instead, even those who still refuse to accept the rescuing hand of the Savior. Brothers and Sisters: I testify with all the urgency of my soul that each of us is here on this earth precisely because we all once believed God with great conviction. Each of us, you and I, believed our eldest brother could actually do what would be required of Him,³⁸ and we believed in the support we would receive from each other. I testify that Jesus' arms are stretched out still, beckoning us to accept His wondrous gift—that it might not have been offered in vain. All we have to do is to believe Him, accept His hand, and invite Him into our lives, by committing to Him that we want Him to be our new, just master. We want to be claimed by Him. We want to be owned by Him and take upon ourselves His holy name. Baptism is the gate, followed by a life emulating that of the Savior.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is Administered by His Church

Why do we need the Gospel in our lives? Our choice of masters is literally about choosing between life and death,³⁹ between joy and suffering. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the protectorate of the restored priesthood of Jesus Christ. The Church is the *applied* Good News of divinely authorized ordinances, promises and covenants. These covenants are exercised through that same priesthood power, allowing us to formally accept the ransom that Jesus paid for our rescue and freedom, to

formally commit ourselves to following that loving new master, and to find true joy through the blessings that He graciously offers.⁴⁰ We want to be with our families forever. We want cherished loving relationships not to be severed at death. We keep our covenants made through the saving ordinances of the priesthood because we want to receive the greatest gift that God has in store for those who love Him when we truly become whole, complete and perfected in Christ— Eternal Life⁴¹.

Notes

- ¹ 2 Ne 28:8, many say that God will beat us with a few stripes and save us at the last day.
- ² Alma 42:22, Mosiah 15:26-27, unchanging relationships between divine law, willful rebellion against God, justice, punishment, repentance, mercy; 2 Ne 9:46 my sins are mine (accountability). The devil hath obtained me, that I am prey to his awful misery.
- ³ Alma 5:19-20, we each choose who owns us. See also v. 37-40 for the test: who is our shepherd?
- ⁴ 2 Ne 2:27-29, choose the mediator of liberty and eternal life, or the captor of misery. Alma 12:13-18, 2 Ne 9:23-27, Final state of those who do not accept the divine rescue.
- ⁵ Mosiah 2: 32-33, Alma 5:41-42, *wages* paid for being the devil's subjects: woe, damnation, everlasting punishment, death.
- ⁶ 2 Ne 31:10-13, 21, repent, follow the savior through baptism, take on the name of Christ.
- ⁷ Matt 5:48, be ye therefore perfect...
- ⁸ 1 Ne 3:7, the Lord gives no commandment without preparing a way to keep it. We sing about this from the time we are small children, but how well do we actually believe it?
- ⁹ The definition of primal referred to here is that of *basic* or *fundamental*, to convey the concept that every sin in the "thou shalt not..." category has, at its base, the underpinning primal sin of believing Satan in preference to God. Additionally primal also means *first*, here used in a case study as the first documented sin.
- ¹⁰ Matt 4:2-4, temptation by Satan for the fasting Jesus to turn stones to bread.
- ¹¹ Jn 8:44, Jesus' perspective: Satan was a liar and murderer from the beginning.
- ¹² Mosiah 2:36-37, scriptural definition of the primal sin.
- ¹³ Jn 8:29, 49, Jesus only does that which pleases and honors the Father.
- ¹⁴ The lifelong activity of becoming "perfected in Christ", which involves the completeness of thought, spirit, mind, action and body is beyond this discussion and is well described in the ministry (Eph 4:11-13, Moroni 10:32-33). Here we focus on the minimum aspect of keeping the Lord's injunction, relevant to everyday living.
- ¹⁵ Jn 8:30-32, 45-47 believe *on* (by exercising faith), then continue (believe & act) to be a disciple. See also Jn 10:24-27; 12:26. To believe is to follow and to serve. Jn 12:47-50, The risk of not believing the words of Christ.
- ¹⁶ D&C 76:25-38 (esp. v. 31-32 primal sin from primary source), 2 Ne 9:16, D&C 88:35
- ¹⁷ Alma 42:1, 10, 12, 14, Mosiah 3:18-19, 25-26, D&C 29:34-47 Context of the Fall: multiple choices to obey Satan in preference to God by fully accountable individuals who willfully crowned him the god of this world (see also 2 Cor 4:3-4) because they yielded to his commands. They then received wages of he whom they listed to obey.
- ¹⁸ Jn 8:34, Jesus' perspective: whoso commits sin is the servant of sin; Romans 6:16-18. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.

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- ¹⁹ Moses 6:28-29, 48-49, 58-59, the fall: disobeying the will & commandment of God.
- ²⁰ Romans 5:12, 3:23, by Adam came death. All have sinned, fall short of God's glory.
- ²¹ Alma 34:34-35, we are subject to Satan who seals us as his own, has all power over us.
- ²² D&C 76:43-49, the nature of Satan's domain.
- ²³ 2 Ne 2:4; 2 Ne 9:6-10; Moses 6:52-53, 57, 60, 62; 3 Ne 27:13-15; Morm 9:11-15, the Gospel by description and by definition. Alma 12:22-27, Alma 42:4, 10, 13, probation.
- ²⁴ 2 Ne 31:17-21, description of the strait and narrow path leading to eternal life.
- ²⁵ JST Matthew 26:22, take, eat; this is in remembrance of my body which I give a ransom for you; verse 2, Again We Meet around the Board (Hymns #186, Eliza R. Snow) "A world to purchase and to save and seal a triumph o'er the grave"; See also Verse 1, Reverently and Meekly Now (Hymns #185, Joseph L. Townsend) "Think of me, thou ransomed one; Think what I for thee have done. With my body on the tree, I have ransomed even thee."
- ²⁶ Moses 4:1-4, note in v.3: "...by the power of mine only begotten I caused that he should be cast down." Lucifer was already evil. Now he has a personal vendetta.
- ²⁷ The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (The Chronicles of Narnia, Book 1), C.S. Lewis, 1950. In the allegory, Edmund betrays both his siblings and the lion. Lewis was inspired to form parallels between Edmund's betrayal and what we have termed primal sin, prior to exploring a figurative mediation and ransom scenario.
- ²⁸ Jn 8:42, Jesus was sent by the Father to do this work.
- ²⁹ Jn 12:27-30, the hour came that Christ was to be lifted up.
- ³⁰ Jn 12:31-33, "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out"; Jn 14:30-31, "the prince of this world cometh... Arise, let us go hence." Jesus submissively yet confidently went to the appointed time and place for the contest of force against will, that would become His atonement for our sakes.
- ³¹ Mark 14:33-37, Luke 22:41-44 (round 1 with Luke's detail of suffering causing bleeding from every pore), Mark 14:39-40 (round 2), v.41 (round 3)
- ³² 1 Ne 15: 34-35, awful hell: the devil is its preparator, as well as the punishments there.
- ³³ Matt 26:38, My soul is sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me.
- ³⁴ Jn 10:17-18, Jesus has power given to Him from the Father both to lay down His life and to take it up again.
- ³⁵ Behold the Great Redeemer Die (Hymns #191, Eliza R. Snow), I Stand All Amazed (Hymns #193, Charles H. Gabriel). Our perspective as *witnesses* in deed, and also by covenant to recall and remember (see also D&C 20:77, 79).
- ³⁶ D&C 19:15-19 is relevant to any situation where we are subject to Lucifer.
- ³⁷ Job 38:7, we shouted for joy for many reasons at the thought of earth life as a gift.
- ³⁸ Alma 7:11-13, what would be required of Jesus to blot out His people's transgressions.
- ³⁹ 2 Ne 10:23; Deut 30:19-20; Hel 14:31, I give you life or death: choose life.
- ⁴⁰ 2 Ne 31:17-20, the path of faith, repentance, baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost.
- ⁴¹ Moses 1:39, "This is my work and my glory, to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man."