

THE ATONEMENT: THE GREATEST COVENANT EVER KEPT

by Tiffany Stenson Erickson, January 29, 2017

I hadn't considered the Atonement as an official covenant until fairly recently. I knew Christ volunteered to be our Savior in heaven, but I guess I saw it more like a calling. I hadn't viewed the Atonement as an actual, binding, formal covenant until a year or two ago when we read something in Relief Society by John Taylor:

“The well beloved Son then addressed the Father, and instead of proposing to carry out a plan of his own, knowing what His Father's will was said, [“Thy will be done; I will carry out thy plans and thy designs and as many will fall, I will offer myself as an atonement according to thy will, O God. Neither do I wish the honor, but thine be the glory] and a covenant was entered into between Him and His Father, in which He agreed to atone for the sins of the world.”

Later in the same lesson, John Taylor states, “The plan, the arrangement, the agreement, the covenant was made, entered into and accepted before the foundation of the world,…”

That one word "covenant" hit me like a lighting bolt as I sat there in Relief Society. It permanently changed how I viewed the Atonement. The understanding that the Atonement was an official covenant that Jesus Christ entered into made a deep imprint on my heart and it got me to thinking.

What can we learn about keeping our own covenants by observing and studying how Jesus Christ kept his covenant of the Atonement?

As I pondered my question, I came up with five parallels between the Atonement and our own covenants:

1. IT IS GOING TO BE HARDER THAN WE EVER THOUGHT

Jesus agreed in the pre-mortal world to suffer for our sins. He agreed 'in theory' yet he had no idea what the Atonement would be like 'in reality.' He knew philosophically but could not know physically. Remember he had never had a body at that point so there was no way he could fully comprehend the kind of pain and anguish he was agreeing to.

In Mark 14:33 we read that Jesus was “sore amazed” as he began the Atonement. In Greek “sore amazed” means “astonished” or “awestruck.”

Neil A. Maxwell says, “Thus when the agony came in its fulness; it was so much, much worse than even He with his unique intellect had ever imagined!... The cumulative weight of all mortal sins- past, present, and future, pressed upon that perfect, sinless, and sensitive soul.

The anguished Jesus not only pled with the Father that the hour and cup might pass from Him, but with this relevant citation; “And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me.”

Many of us have experienced the same “astonishment”. Pain we could never have imagined until the moment it was actually happening to us. I call them ‘bathroom floor moments’ when you plead with the Father to take it away- to not make it be so- to not have to do what you have to do.

Where we cry out to the Father using two different names because one just doesn't cut it.

Oh yah, I'll take a body. And then there is cancer and chronic illness and depression and death.

Oh yah, I'll get married. And then your spouse betrays you or abuses you or deeply disappoints you and you have to figure out Plan B.

Oh yah, I'll get pregnant. And then there is violent morning sickness, 80 extra pounds, bed rest, and 10 pound babies.

Oh yah, I'll be the Bishop. And then there's the meetings, and the late night phone calls, and the confessions and the tears and the heartaches, and the people you somehow offended.

Oh yah, I'll have children. And then your sleep is shot and your heart is vulnerable and you give them everything you have and they still make gut-wrenching, wrong choices. And you have to sit back and watch agency in action.

Oh yah, I'll send my son or daughter on a mission and then that Wednesday comes when you have to drop them off at the MTC.

We have all agreed to things in theory that are much more difficult to do in practice. Don't be surprised when things are harder to do than we ever could have imagined.

So there is no shame or sin in shock or in astonishment. To feel deep pain and want a way out, is part of being human. Remember even Christ himself was taken back by the enormity of what he had agreed to do.

2. LOOK OUTWARD

One of the most beautiful and inspiring things about Jesus keeping this painful covenant is how gracefully and selflessly he did it. He looked outward when it would have been really easy to look inward and be concerned with his own suffering.

First, the night before Jesus was going to go to the Garden of Gethsemane- the worst day of anyone's life in the history of the world- He gave his disciples the Holy Ghost so they could be comforted when He was gone.

Then right after the Garden where he sweat drops of blood and suffered for the whole world, he healed the servant's ear that had been cut off.

When he was on the cross, he prayed for the two sinners next to him and pleaded with his Father "forgive them for they know not what they do." He also gave them hope and reassurance when he was in excruciating physical and spiritual pain. He told them, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."

We must do the same. We must keep our eyes up to see others when we want to cast them down. As we strive to keep our baptismal, priesthood and temple covenants we must look outward. As Jesus looked outward even through his immense pain and suffering so can we. In our own trials and when our own faith is tested, we can serve others.

3. ENDURE ALL THE WAY TO THE END

Jesus had to suffer twice. Once in the garden and once on the cross.

When I was a kid, I thought that Jesus suffered for the pains and sins of the world in the Garden of Gethsemane and then suffered just the physical pain of crucifixion on the cross- that alone seemed like enough. But Bruce R. McConkie tell us "for

while he was hanging on the cross for another three hours, from noon to 3:00 P.M., all the infinite agonies and merciless pains of Gethsemane recurred.” So while Jesus was in physical agony on the cross, the pains of Gethsemane came back to him AGAIN in his much weakened condition.

It’s one thing to do something once, but it’s an entirely different thing to do that same something again when you’re no longer naive. The second time you know exactly what to expect and that’s almost worse than not knowing.

Jesus knew that he would have to suffer Gethsemane all over again.

Enduring all the way to the end meant staying on the cross when he could have gotten off at any moment. Enduring to the end means sticking it out through the crown on his head, through the lashing that ripped his skin, through carrying his own cross to Golgotha, through the nails in his hands and wrists, through the vinegar in the mouth, through the stab wound in his the side, through the mocking and disrespect, through God withdrawing his spirit and even through Gethsemane returning—Jesus stayed and finished what he covenanted to do long before he had a clue what he was actually saying yes to.

We must do the same. Stick it out all the way to the end.

Not just until we get out of high school and away from mom and dad.

Not just till we serve a mission and are released.

Not just until we get married in the temple.

Not just until we get to bless or baptize our child.

Not just until the kids are out of the house.

But to the bitter, painful end, Jesus kept his covenants and endured and so must we.

4. GENERATIONS ARE DEPENDING ON IT

Imagine if Jesus Christ didn’t endure to the end. Imagine if he didn't keep his covenant or fulfill his promise of the Atonement. "The whole human family would have to lie in the grave throughout eternity without any hope." (John Taylor)

“For it is expedient that an atonement should be made; for according to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish; ... yea, all are fallen and are lost, and must perish except it be through the atonement” (Alma 34:9).

If Jesus Christ didn't keep His Atonement covenant, we wouldn't have repentance or the resurrection. We would be alone in our sins and pains and afflictions and more importantly, so would our loved ones. Our spouses, our children, and our grandchildren wouldn't be able to repent. Nor would have our grandparents or great-grandparents been able to repent before us. And if our ancestors couldn't have repented all of us would likely be in a different place than we are now.

Cecil O. Samuelson said, “We must never forget that we figuratively eat fruit grown on trees we did not plant, drink from wells we did not dig, learn and live in buildings we did not build, and are warmed by fires for which we did not provide the fuel.”

I also believe we are benefiting from past covenants we did not make and we did not keep.

Cecil O. Samuelson continues, "All that we experience is made so much better and satisfying because those of previous times and generations cared not only for their present, but also for the future - our present.”

Elder Neil L. Anderson says, “As we turn our attention to others—first our spouse, then our family, and then to others—spiritually lifting them and helping them remain firm and steady, we are saving generations and fulfilling our eternal destiny.”

Our children, our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren and all future generations are counting on us to keep our covenants now. Just like the Atonement spanned backwards and forwards so will our diligence. We heal and inspire the past and the future when we keep our covenants.

Just like the Atonement saved us, we are literally saving our future family through current covenant keeping.

5. THE MOTIVE HAS TO BE LOVE

I used to think that the Atonement was the greatest act of self-control ever. After all, He could have stopped his pain at any moment with just a snap of the fingers or a command from his lips. This trial was not imposed upon him like cancer or death or betrayal is imposed on us. We have to endure because we can't stop the pain. But the amazing thing is that Jesus could have stopped His own pain at any moment and He didn't.

But His will-power is not what got him through. It wasn't about self-control or white knuckling it. His sacrifice was motivated and fueled and sustained by LOVE. It was his intense love for His Father and for us. LOVE is the only motive strong enough to endure. Any other motive would have failed Him.

Think back to Satan's motive in the pre-mortal world. He wanted glory. Although agency is the key principal in the war in heaven, I do believe that motive was a sub-talking point. God knew that 'glory' would never have sustained Satan through the temptations and pain of the life required of a Savior. If Satan didn't cave long before the Garden of Gethsemane, he would have caved with the first drop of blood. No amount of glory is worth that kind of pain. God knew we would desperately need the Atonement to happen, so he knew Satan could not be our guy because glory could not be the motive.

So it must be with us. We cannot keep our covenants out of glory, out of duty, out of pride, out of tradition, or because we'd let our mom and dad down. We cannot keep our covenants because our friends and neighbors might judge us or because that is just what we've always known.

Those motives are like building on sand.

The world is going to get too messy. Life is going to get too hard. If we want to make it through all that is coming our way, we must be motivated by the same deep love that Jesus had -- Love for God, Love for Jesus Christ, and Love for all of us.

{{Now how to get that love if you don't have it is a whole other talk for a different day.}}

This may be an oversimplification, but with this reasoning

If you don't want to pay tithing, love more.

If you have some word of wisdom issues that are hard to give up, love more.

If you yell too much, love more.

If you are resentful of your church calling, love more.

If you have a hard time keeping the Sabbath Day holy, love more.

If you have a grudge you are holding on to, love more.

If you have a problem with pornography, love God and Jesus Christ more.

Love is the answer to everything.

Jesus taught us this:

One day a group of religious scholars were arguing over what was the most important part of the law or gospel. They wanted to get the Savior's take on it. They asked Him to weigh in on the controversy:

"Master," they asked Him, "which is the great commandment in the law?"

Jesus answered: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

I'm going to add, on these two commandments hang all our covenants as well.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland suggested, "I am not certain just what our experience will be on Judgement Day, but I will be very surprised if at some point in the conversation God asks, "Did you love me?"

God likely will not ask, "Did you keep your covenants?" because the answer to "Did you love me?" will be telling enough.

Elder Holland goes on to say, "I invite each of us to evaluate how much we love the Savior, using as a measure how joyfully we keep our covenants."

If there is anyone here struggling to make covenants or to keep sacred covenants, remember that Jesus Christ kept the most difficult covenant of all because he loved YOU. Angels attended him as he strived to keep this magnificent covenant and angels can attend you. They may be from your own family-- present and future. They will bear you up when things are harder than you ever thought, when you want to shut down and look inward, and when you don't want to endure all the way to the end because they are counting on it as well.

May we go forth with faith, cheerful hearts, and a great desire to be covenant keepers. May we all keep the covenants we have made or will make. This is how we demonstrate our love for our Father in Heaven and for our Savior.

May we continue to learn from and be inspired by "The Atonement: The Greatest Covenant Ever Kept."

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Some resources I used

Teachings: John Taylor, Chapter 5

Teachings: John Taylor, Chapter 6

Neil A. Maxwell: "Willing to Submit"

Bruce R. McConkie: "The Purifying Power of Gethsemane"

Cecil O. Samuelson: "Your Future"

Deiter F. Uchtdorf: "Aiming at the Center"

Linda K. Burton: "The Power, Joy and Love of Covenant Keeping"

Elder David A. Bednar: "The Character of Christ"