

That They Might Not Suffer: The Gift of Atonement

By Eugene England

This sermon was one of a series given in early 1966 to introduce Mormonism to friends of LDS students at Stanford University. At the time, Gene was editor of *Dialogue*, a teaching assistant in both the English and religious studies departments, and serving in the Stanford Ward bishopric.

This version was originally published in: *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1966): 141–55. It is No. 3 in the “From the Pulpit” series *Dialogue* ran in its early years.

A DEEP FEELING OF estrangement haunts modern life and literature and thought. The feeling is not at all new to human experience, but in our time we seem especially conscious of it. More men seem caught up by the divisions in their lives to a terrible anguish or a numbed resignation.

We find ourselves cut off from *others*, relating to each other as things, not as personal images of the eternal God; unable to say our truest thoughts and feelings to each other, exterminating each other in the gas ovens of Auschwitz and the firestorms of Berlin, fighting unjust wars to satisfy our greed or pride, responding to the color we reflect to each other’s eyes and not to our sense of each other’s being.

We find ourselves cut off from *God*, without a deep sense of joyful relation to him; witnessing him die in us and our civilization through the dead forms of our concepts of him and the inflexible forms of our response to him in the world; unable to let our confidence wax strong in his presence through the feeling that our lives are in harmony with his will.

And we find ourselves cut off from *ourselves*. We sin. We act contrary to our image of ourselves and break our deepest integrity. We do not just make mistakes through lack of knowledge or judgment but consciously go contrary to our sense of right; and therefore we not only suffer the natural consequences of all wrong action (however innocently done), but we also suffer the inner estrangement of guilt—that supreme human suffering which gives us our images of hell. This is an important distinction, made very clearly in Christian thought: “To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it no, to him it is sin” is James’s definition. Christ had said, “If ye were blind, ye should have no sin, but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.” We all know sin. We are inescapably moral by nature in that we cannot evade the question that finally comes into all reflection: “Am I justified?” We have eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and find the self of action tragically divided against the self of belief.

These are things we all know about. And if we are Christians we also know something about a claim which is incredible to most men—the claim that these estrangements can uniquely be healed through the Atonement of Christ. Atonement—a word whose pronunciation disguises its meaning, which is literally *at one ment*, a bringing to unity, a reconciliation of that which is estranged: man and man, man and God, or man and himself. That Atonement remains, as Paul described it, “unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness.” We have no greater need than that there be a force of healing in all our public and inner strife: that there be some source of forgiveness and change for the oppressor as well as help for the oppressed; that there be something large enough in love to reach past the wrongs we each have done and can never fully make restitution for; that there be hope in the possibility that any man can be renewed by specific means to a life of greater justice and mercy toward others. But for most men the claim that such a possibility truly exists is scandalous.

The scandal to humanistic man is the idea that man cannot go it alone—that his reason will not save him. Knowing what is right is not enough; there must be power to *do* what is right, and men (as the appalling organized evil of this century has reminded us), no matter how sophisticated or civilized they become, continue to act against what they know is right—their additional knowledge and merely efficient reason capable of becoming, in fact, more powerful means of doing evil. The scandal to the non-Christian is that God would take the necessary reconciliation upon himself, but is somehow unable to do it except by descending below all men into particular events in the history of the Jews and finally into the particular body and life of one man, Jesus of Nazareth—and that as a man he would enter the full range of human experience, including the very thing he was to save us from, estrangement itself. The scandal to the non-Mormon is the claim by a contemporary church of special insight into the meaning and means of the Atonement and of special authority in making it efficacious in the lives of men.

In his letter about Mormon beliefs to Chicago editor Joseph Wentworth in 1842, Joseph Smith said, “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.” The Atonement makes it possible that *all* men *may* be saved—by obedience. God’s concern is for the salvation of every man and he expresses that concern in the free gift of the Atonement, which, as we shall see, is directly related to man’s actual growth through obedience—in fact, *makes such obedience possible*. The understanding that Joseph Smith had come to through a long process of revelation and study find succinct expression in this Article of Faith. It embodies a unique understanding of the harmonious relationship of grace and works and of the resulting effect of the Atonement on the moral nature of man, and it implies a unique role of the properly authorized Church in bringing to men the full power of that effect through the teachings and ordinances of the Gospel.

IN TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN thought, the Atonement of Christ has always been related directly to the Fall of Adam. For some, it has seemed a direct and relatively simple answer, a solution to the estrangement of God from man which

was caused by God's rejection of Adam after Adam's rebellion had spoiled God's plan. But most Christians (and Jews) have been able to see that it is inconsistent with their understanding of the nature of God to imagine him turning his back on man, to suppose that man must propitiate God and win back his favor in the process of atonement. Clearly any rejection involved is the rejection of God by man and any reconciliation must be the reconciliation of man to God. As Paul said to the Corinthians, "[God] has reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto t h e m . . . " (II Cor. 5:18–19). But in too much Christian theology, as well as folk religion, the Atonement has remained an event remote from the common life of man, somehow involving Adam and God and mysterious supernatural realms such as the spirit prison or strange metaphysical structures such as absolute justice—something crucial, no doubt, and to be deeply grateful for, but having nothing very clear to do with redeeming the daily round of studying differential equations and commuting to work and waking up in the night in the deep loneliness and pain of our regret.

Mormons are certainly not immune to this tendency to miss the immediate relevance of the Atonement to their day-to-day lives, but there are dramatically unorthodox resources in Mormon theology with which to involve man in that relevance. In Mormon scriptures Adam's action did in no way spoil God's plan but was, in fact, *part* of the plan—a preordained action, necessary to man's eternal development, which Adam entered into knowingly. Mormons do not look upon Adam as a depraved, willful sinner caught up in a pride of his own being and a desire to know which led him to rebel against God, but rather Mormons see him as a great, courageous figure who chose a difficult path necessary to his and all men's progression—the way of estrangement and reconciliation, of sin and resultant openness to redeeming love.

Mormon scriptures tell of Adam becoming, as it were, a Christian. Sometime after his expulsion from the Garden, in the time of his separation from God and extreme consciousness of the threat of death, Adam is taught by an angel of the Lord about Christ's mission, which would come to fruition on the earth in the far distant future. Christ's Atonement would include a Resurrection which would eventually reunite each man's spirit and body in a condition of everlasting life; and it would also include a Redemption that could immediately give to each man *who chose to respond to it* power to be reunited to himself and to God in a condition of *eternal* (or increasingly God-like) life. These scriptures, given in vision to Joseph Smith from the writings of Moses, unabashedly imply a notion heretical to most traditional Christian thought—*Felix Culpa*, the fortunate fall. Adam's response to the great message of the angel about the forthcoming Atonement is, "Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God" (Moses 5:10).

A Book of Mormon prophet makes the point in these words: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing

good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon . . . “ (II Nephi 2:25–26). The clear implication is that the process of estrangement and reconciliation, of sin and atonement, is not a flaw, an accidental thwarting of God’s plan, but an essential part of it, a necessary ingredient of man’s eternal realization of his possibilities as a child of God. Through this process, and apparently no other, he is able to reach the depths and thereby the heights of his soul’s capacity—to know fully his capacity for evil and to know the full freedom and strength of soul that come uniquely through being caught up in response to the “pure love of Christ.”

There is an additional important implication of this account of Adam, which is reinforced by many experiences in the Book of Mormon. It is clear that long before Christ had actually performed the central acts of the Atonement—the suffering in Gethsemane, the death on the cross, the resurrection—men were able to be affected by those acts through the prophetic knowledge that God was willing to perform them in the future. What this means is that the mechanics of the mission itself did not occur in time as a necessary precursor to their effect on men, as some theories of the Atonement would require; Christ’s mission was not to straighten out some metaphysical warp in the universe that Adam’s taking of the fruit had created. The effects of the Atonement were not metaphysical but moral and spiritual: they reach men living at any time and place through each man’s *knowledge* of the spirit and events of the Atonement.

ABOUT 600 YEARS before Christ was born, a young man living in Jerusalem, seeking confirmation of his father’s spiritual experiences, was given a remarkable vision:

I looked and beheld the great city of Jerusalem, and also other cities. And I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin. . . . And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdst thou? And I said unto him: a virgin most beautiful and fair above all other virgins. And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God? And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things. And he said unto me: Behold the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh. . . . And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms. And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father. (I Nephi 11:13–21)

After further explanation by the Angel, Nephi continues, “And the angel said unto me again: Look and behold the condescension of God! And I looked and beheld the Redeemer of the world, of whom my Father had spoken” (I Nephi 11:26–27).

We have here an important insight into the Atonement of Christ, an insight preserved by this young man and his people in their religious history as they journeyed to America and until their descendants six hundred years later welcomed Christ there after his death and resurrection. The word chosen by Joseph Smith in his translation is crucial: *condescension*—descending with. Christ is the descending

of God with man into all that man experiences, including his estrangement, and this is somehow the heart of the power of the Atonement.

Many years after this group of people had arrived in America, one of their great prophet-kings named Benjamin, approaching old age and death, gathered his people together to declare to them a great revelation of understanding that had come to him. After reminding them in very colorful terms of the implications of their human tendency to sin and the effects of guilt upon a man—“which doth cause him to shrink from the presence of God, and doth fill his breast with guilt, pain, and anguish, which is like an unquenchable fire, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever”—King Benjamin tells them of a vision that had come to him of an event still 125 years in the future:

For behold, the time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay. . . .

And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death: for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people.

And he shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning; and his mother shall be called Mary.

And lo, he cometh unto his own, that salvation might come unto the children of men even through faith on his name (Mosiah 3:5,7–9)

Here for the first time chronologically in all known scripture we have a clear reference to what seems to be the central experience of that part of Christ's Atonement that concerns our individual sins: “Behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people.” This is not a description of what occurred on the cross, but of what occurred in the Garden of Gethsemane in that night when Christ participated fully in the fearful loneliness that lies at the extremity of human experience—participated somehow in the anguish of estrangement. Christ descended, through capabilities which only he had as the literal Son of God, into the fullness, both in depth and breadth, of human guilt. We begin to get clearer insight into what occurred in that Garden through a revelation given by the Lord Jesus Christ to Joseph Smith in 1830.

Therefore I command you to repent—repent, lest . . . your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not. For Behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent: But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my

preparations unto the children of men. (Doctrine and Covenants 19:15–19)

Although we certainly can't begin to understand all that happened in Gethsemane, especially *how* it happened, we can begin to feel the impact in our hearts of the divine love expressed there. Jesus Christ has somehow created the greatest possibility we can imagine: that our common lot of meaninglessness and alienation can be redeemed, that we might not suffer if we would repent. The God who planned and created and who directs our earth experience, who sent us here into tragic risk and suffering because only here could we experience further growth in his likeness, has sent his son, not only to guide and teach us through his revelations and his life, but to enter willingly into the depths of man's life and redeem him—not offering solutions without knowing the pain of the problem and not setting prior conditions, but taking into himself the fullness of pain in all human estrangement in some awful awareness of the full force of human evil. Because the love is unconditionally offered and comes freely from the same person who gives us our standard of right and will eventually judge us, it has the power to release man from the barrier of his own guilt and give him the strength to repent.

The effect of King Benjamin's revelation on his people was immediate and dramatic. After hearing his words,

. . . they all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which 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. And we, ourselves, also, through the infinite goodness of God, and the manifestations of his Spirit, have great views of that which is to come. . . . And it is the faith which we have had on the things which our king has spoken unto us that has brought us to this great knowledge, whereby we do rejoice with such exceeding great joy. And we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments and all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days. . . . (Mosiah 5:2–5)

King Benjamin responded,

Ye have spoken the words that I desired; And, now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name. . . . And under this head ye are made free, and there is no other head whereby ye can be made free. There is no other name given whereby salvation cometh; therefore, I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye shall be obedient unto the end of your lives. (Mosiah 5:6–8)

A great thing is occurring here—the formation of a Christian community *in 125 B.C.* as a group of people respond in faith to the possibility that they can be at one

with themselves through means provided by Christ. Struck to the heart by the meaning of God's love extended to them in the midst of their estrangement from him and themselves, they experience a mighty change which leads them into a covenant and the covenant sustains a process of development through continual repentance toward the image of Christ.

Fifty years later, another prophet among these people, clearly influenced by the prophecies and experiences which had been part of his people's history, discoursed on the sacrifice of Christ and made even clearer what had happened to King Benjamin's people.

[I]t is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice, and then shall there be . . . a stop to the shedding of blood, then shall the law of Moses be fulfilled. . . .

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 me that they 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. (Alma 34:13–16)

This prophet, named Amulek, seems to be saying that Christ's sacrifice—his suffering—is uniquely capable of striking through the barrier in man's nature which prevents him from overcoming his estrangement from himself enough to move on to achieve the exalting power to act as he believes. Here we must remind ourselves of an amazing aspect of the eternal human personality. Paradoxically, man's moral sense of justice both brings him to the awareness of sin that must begin all repentance and yet interferes with his attempts to repent. He feels that every action must bear its consequences and that he must justify his actions to himself; since there is a gap between belief and action he is in a state which brings into his heart and mind a sense of guilt, of unbearable division within himself. This same moral nature, this sense of justice that demands satisfaction, causes him to want to improve his life but also to insist that he pay the penalty in some way for his sin. But of course there is no way he can finally do this. As Paul knew from his own experience and expressed so poignantly in his epistles, the law which men looked to for salvation in the Pharisaic tradition can inculcate great moral seriousness and indicate direction for change, but it can also be a terrible burden because man always fails to some degree in living it fully and it therefore stands as a continual reminder of his failure—a failure that the law's framework of justice demands be paid for, but which man is incapable of paying for. God pierces to the heart of this paradox through the Atonement, and it becomes possible for man to personally experience both alienation

and reconciliation, which opens him to the full meaning of both evil and good, bringing him to a condition of meekness and lowliness of heart where he can freely accept from God the power to be a god.

Christ is the unique manifestation in human experience of the fulness of that unconditional love from God which Paul chose to represent with the Greek term *agape*. As Paul expressed it, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Christ’s sacrificial love was not conditional upon our qualities, our repentance, anything; he expressed his love to us while we were yet in our sins—not *completing* the process of forgiveness, which depends on our response, but *initiating* it in a free act of mercy. This is a kind of love quite independent from the notion of justice. There is no *quid-pro-quo* about it. It is entirely unbalanced, unmerited, unrelated to the specific worthiness of the object (except in that each man has intrinsic worth through his eternal existence and God-like potential), and that is precisely why it is redemptive. It takes a risk, without calculation, on the possibility that man can realize his infinite worth. It gets directly at that barrier in man, his sense of justice, which makes him incapable of having unconditional love *for himself*—unable to respond positively to his own potential, because he is unable to forgive himself, unable to be at peace with himself until he has somehow “made up” in suffering for his sins, something he is utterly incapable of doing. The demands of justice that Amulek is talking about, which must be overpowered, are from *man’s own sense of justice*, not some abstract eternal principle but our own demands on ourselves, demands which rightly bring us into estrangement with ourselves (as we gain new knowledge of right but do not live up to it) and thus begin the process of growth through repentance, but which cannot complete that process. An awareness of the true meaning and source of that last sacrifice and its intent has the power, as Amulek says, “to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance.”

That the Atonement is performed by *Christ*, the son and revelation of God, is, of course, crucial. He represents to man the ultimate source of justice and is the one whose teachings and example bring man directly to face his need for repentance; he awakens man’s own sense of justice and stands as a judge over all his actions and only he can fully release man from what becomes the immobilizing burden of that judgment, through the power of mercy extended unconditionally in the Atonement. It is possible, as King Benjamin’s people found, to be moved to sufficient faith in a divine being by his redemptive act that there comes into the soul a power which can bring men to repentance as no other power can. I stand all amazed at this love—and that is precisely the point: This love can move us with sufficient amazement through our knowledge of it to change our minds and our hearts, to release us from self-inflicted suffering as it creates in us the possibility of new being through repentance.

The question “Why is man’s salvation dependent on Christ and the events surrounding his death?” is the most central and the most difficult question in Christian theology. The answers (and there are many) are, as I have said, the chief scandal of Christianity to the non-believer. Attempts to define logical theories of the Atonement based on New Testament scriptures have been largely contradictory and

ultimately futile—mainly because the New Testament is not a book of theology, a logical treatise, but rather gives us the reactions, the varied emotional responses, of men to the Atonement as they experienced it and tried to find images for their joy. Some men clearly felt released from the powers of evil and darkness which they believed, much more literally than any of us today, were all about them. Some believed that their souls had been bought from the devil. Some felt that Christ had taken their place in suffering the just and necessary punishment under the law for their sins. The explanation I have tried to develop, based largely on Book of Mormon scriptures, is at significant variance with most of these theories, especially on one major point: The redemptive effect of the Atonement depends on how *an individual man* responds to it rather than on some independent effect on the universe or God, which theories such as the ransom theory, the substitution theory, the satisfaction theory, etc., all tend to imply. Of course, the rich reality of the Atonement lies beyond any theory or explanation, including the one I am suggesting here, and some men bring themselves into redeeming relationship with God from within the framework of each of these theories as they somehow reach through to that rich reality. But the need for powerful personal response and for a release from the immobilizing demands of justice within man seem to me crucial and best served by an explanation different from the traditional theories.

The ransom theory, which was prominent in Christian thought into the middle ages, seems very crude to us today. The idea was that because of Adam's sin man deserved to die and go to hell, but God bought the souls of men from the devil with the sacrifice of Christ. Satan was deceived into believing that he could keep Christ's soul in exchange, but once the bargain was completed, the devil could not hold the soul of the divine, sinless Christ. Of course, this seems to require a concept of a God with whom the devil can make bargains and who in turn is capable of practicing a shabby trick on Satan. The more sophisticated "satisfaction" theory was put forth in the 12th century by Saint Anselm. In Anselm's view, God's nature, which includes absolute justice and mercy, demands satisfaction for man's sins even though God *wants* to forgive man. Man himself is incapable of providing that satisfaction because his sin is infinite, being rebellion against an infinite being. Therefore, to retain his honor and position, God himself, in the person of Christ, becomes a substitute for man in paying for sin through suffering. This view of the Atonement prevails in various forms down to the present day.

The popular image associated with the theory is that of the traffic court: Man has broken the law; justice must be satisfied, but man hasn't enough money; Christ steps forward to pay the fine and release man while still upholding the law. An immediate objection to this view is that it seems on the face of things to be a legalistic formula clearly influenced by the feudal times in which it grew up. It implies that God is in a position much like a feudal lord. If he allows his justice to go unanswered, if he allows people to get off easy, his position will be questioned in the minds of his subjects, which will lead to disrespect and rebellion. Of course, this is carried even further in the notion some have that there is some absolute principle of *retributive* justice (as opposed to natural law of cause and effect) which God himself is bound by despite his own desires, that a certain amount of sin must be

balanced in the scheme of things, sometime and by someone, with equivalent punishment and suffering—in addition to the natural consequences of actions. It is a very disquieting notion that God should be bound to an unfortunate situation and in a way that men clearly are not. In human experience, we continually are able as men to forgive each other without satisfaction and yet with redemption effect.

Anselm's contemporary, Abelard, was convinced that God *could* and that the problem lies in man's nature not God's. He denied the whole legalistic framework, believing that Christ's sacrifice has its redemptive effect by moving men to awareness of guilt and a change of life: "The purpose and cause of the incarnation was that He might illuminate the world by His wisdom and excite it to the love of Himself." The immediate danger of this position, which places the *moral influence* of Christ at the center of the Atonement, was immediately seen—and Abelard's work was rewarded by his denunciation as a heretic. The main problem is that his theory seems to leave the Atonement without a foundation of absolute necessity. In other words, if someone drowns trying to save me after I've fallen in a stream, it is one thing, but if he walks along a stream with me and suddenly jumps in and drowns, crying, "Look how much I love you; I'm giving my life for you," it's hard to see some kind of essential sacrifice taking place.

The Mormon concept of the Atonement which I have suggested seems to me close to Abelard's, with the important addition of an understanding of why the atonement is absolutely necessary. It is not necessary because of some eternal structure of justice in the universe outside man which demands payment from man for his sins, nor of some similar structure within the nature of God. The Atonement is absolutely necessary because of the nature of man himself, a nature that is self-existent, not the creation of God, and therefore uniquely impervious to metaphysical coercion. The problem is not that God's justice must be satisfied (or the universe's) but that *man's* own sense of justice demands satisfaction. When it creates a barrier to repentance that barrier must be broken through and it can not be broken by metaphysical tinkering with the nature of man; it can only be broken through by the powerful suasion of a kind of love which transcends men's sense of justice without denying it—the kind of love that Christ was uniquely able to manifest in the Atonement.

The Atonement is a necessary, but not sufficient, factor in men's salvation from sin—necessary because no one else can fully motivate the process in the free agent, man, and insufficient because man must respond and complete the process. There is no reason to imagine God being unable to forgive. The question is what effect will the forgiveness have; the forgiveness is meaningless unless it leads to repentance. The forgiveness extended in the dramatic events of the Atonement is that kind of forgiveness uniquely capable of bringing "means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance." In other words, the forgiveness must be *accepted* in order to be efficacious: "For what doth it profit a man if a gift is bestowed upon him, and he received not the gift" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:33). As Paul Tillich has pointed out, the most difficult thing for man to do is accept his acceptance, to accept the fact that God accepts him, loves him—freely—even in his sins. Man's usual nature in his dealings with other men and, most important to my point here, in his dealings

with himself, is to demand satisfaction before he can accept, to demand justice before he can forgive. This is not Christ's way and therefore his love (and the love which he tells us we can develop in response to that love) is redemptive. It has a quality of mercy which allows us to be at one with ourselves and thus gain the strength to be the new person that our sense of justice in the first place demanded that we be. We do not repent in order that God will forgive us and atone for our sins, but rather God atones for our sins and begins the process of forgiveness, by extending unconditional love to us, in order that we might repent and thus bring to conclusion the process of forgiveness. And the center of the experience somehow is Christ's ability to break through the barrier of justice, in those men who can somehow freely respond, with the shock of eternal love expressed in Gethsemane. It comes to us only through our deep knowledge of that event and our involvement in the process of sustaining that knowledge in our lives, through the continual reminding of ourselves of the event and recommitment to the implications of it which occurs in the ordinances of the Gospel. The process is a complex one, an ongoing one. It may be triggered by particular events and have climaxes, but essentially it is a lifelong process—one beautifully described towards the end of the Book of Mormon in these words from the prophet Mormon to his son Moroni:

. . . repentance is unto them that are under condemnation and under the curse of a broken law. And the first fruits of repentance is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth meekness, and lowliness of heart; and because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which comforter filleth with hope and perfect love. . . . (Moroni 8:24–26)

As a young missionary, I had never experienced the central drama of the Christian faith and of my Mormon faith in any decisive personal way, but towards the end of my mission experience in Hawaii, in a new assignment different from previous assignments that had meant mainly teaching primary school and administration, I was suddenly faced with a very real human situation involving the central principles of the Gospel. A Southern sharecropper who had lived a life of extreme brutality and self-indulgence, had jumped ship in Hawaii, married a Japanese girl, and under her influence and the influence of children coming into his life had softened and opened—to the point of hearing the Gospel from missionaries. He had believed their message and came to me with a plea for help. He believed that certain principles were true but could not find the power to change his life to live in accordance with those principles and was suffering deeply. He was estranged from himself, his habits terribly opposed to his sense of God and what God hoped for him. As I tried to help him, searching again the scriptures and explanations of the scriptures having to do with the Atonement, as I gropingly expressed my growing sense of what the love of Christ meant to me and tried to express, along with my companion and the man's family, some of that same unconditional love to him, and as I watched him grow under that love and under his growing awareness that Christ was capable of loving and forgiving him in his present condition, he and I both came slowly and then suddenly to a deep sense of the kind of love that was expressed in the Garden that

made atonement possible. I saw him change dramatically as the power inherent in an understanding of that experience came into his life. The burden of sin was lifted and the healing, renewing process of repentance made possible as he said to himself, “If God can have this kind of love for me, who am I to withhold it from myself?” My life didn’t change as dramatically, but the beginnings of change were laid there, and the understanding of atoning love that began there has been increasingly vindicated in all my experience.

Men in our time have turned upon each other with incredible hate and cruelty. And the victims and dispossessed and their allies have turned back in kind. The ills of our time, which grow by escalation—blow for blow, hurt for hurt, raid for raid, riot for riot, all defended in the name of justice and personal or national rights—must eventually be subjected to more than justice.

Each of us must come to a kind of love that can be extended equally to victim and victimizer, dispossessed and dispossessor—and even to ourselves—a kind of love that moves us to demand justice in society and within ourselves and then goes beyond justice to offer forgiveness and healing and beyond guilt to offer redemption and newness of life.

I am convinced by my thought and experience and the deepest whisperings in my soul that there is a source of that love—one that transcends all others and is therefore our salvation. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

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How to cite this essay: Eugene England, “That They Might Not Suffer: The Gift of Atonement,” in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1966): 141–55.

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