Without the knowledge restored through the Book of Mormon, we might never fully understand the Fall and the Atonement.

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “the fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 121).

And yet, notwithstanding the fact that the four Gospels in the New Testament eloquently describe and testify of the Savior’s divine ministry on earth, many misconceptions abound regarding the need for and the purpose of his atonement. This is evidenced by the plethora of Christian religions all claiming correctness in their interpretation of the doctrine of his great atonement and the fundamental purpose of his ministry.

We can be extremely grateful for the Book of Mormon, “the keystone of our religion” (History of the Church, 4:461), which has restored the knowledge and understanding of “many parts which are plain and most precious” (1 Ne. 13:26), which were taken away from the Bible, as foretold in Nephi’s vision (see 1 Ne. 13:19–29).

The absence of these plain and precious doctrines has led to various misconceptions such as the belief that Adam and Eve were evil and their fall was a grievous disappointment to Deity. This erroneous line of reasoning continues to assume that because of the transgression of Adam and Eve all infants born thereafter are tainted by “the original sin” and must, therefore, be baptized in their infancy to become pure again.

Another pervasive belief is that one’s salvation is predestined according to God’s good pleasure, that predestination overrides personal agency, and that grace supersedes the need for good works and participation in essential ordinances. Still another misconception concerns the Savior’s resurrection. Many churches teach that God the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost are three spirits in one and that after the Resurrection we, too, will remain spirits forever.

Let us briefly review the remarkably clear teachings of the Book of Mormon regarding the relationship between the fall of man and the Savior’s infinite atonement.

**The Fall**

Inspiried Book of Mormon prophets repeatedly teach us that the Fall was a necessary and foreseen part of the great plan of happiness and that “the way [to salvation] is prepared from the fall of man” (2 Ne. 2:4; see also Mosiah 4:7). Far from being a great disappointment and disgrace to their Heavenly Father, Adam and Eve were his instruments to further the divine plan “which was prepared from the foundation of the world” (Mosiah 15:19). Indeed, Father Lehi taught his son Jacob that “if Adam [and Eve] had not transgressed [they] would not have fallen, but [they] would have remained in the garden of Eden,…

“And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin” (2 Ne. 2:22–23; see also Alma 12:22–24).

The purpose of the Fall is succinctly summarized by Lehi: “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Ne. 2:25). Much of this joy is found in our posterity. Further, modern prophets have borne witness that in God’s divine justice and mercy, those who live worthy lives and who are denied the blessings of parenthood on earth will receive eternal compensation, and no blessings of exaltation will be lost if they remain true and faithful (see Harold B. Lee, Ye Are the Light of the World, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1974, p. 292; Joseph Fielding Smith, Answers to Gospel Questions, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr., 5 vols., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957–66, 2:36).

Alma taught that through the Fall “all mankind became a lost and fallen people” (Alma 12:22). He further explained to his son Corianton that “as … the fall had brought upon all mankind a spiritual death as well as a temporal, that is, they were cut off from the presence of the Lord, it was expedient that mankind should be reclaimed from this spiritual death” (Alma 42:9; see also Alma 12:16, 32; Alma 40:26; Hel. 14:16).

Jacob rejoiced in his knowledge of the great plan of
of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit” (2 Ne. 9:10; see also Hel. 14:17; Mosiah 15:19).

The Atonement

One of the most profound and unique doctrinal contributions of the Book of Mormon is its teachings on the principle of restoration as this relates to Christ’s infinite atonement. In atoning for our sins, he made it possible for us to be restored, after the Resurrection, to the state of existence for which we are prepared.

Alma teaches us that “there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth; otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment” (Alma 42:22). By atoning for our sins as our Father planned, the Savior stands “betwixt” all of us sinners and the demands of justice, “having … taken upon himself [our] iniquity and [our] transgressions” (Mosiah 15:8–9). An atonement which could satisfy justice required the sacrifice of an innocent person who would vicariously suffer the punishment for the sins of others (see Alma 34:8–16). Justice demanded death, and the Redeemer died that he might become the firstfruits of the Resurrection and overcome the bonds of death. Mercy opened the way for the resurrection of all.

The Atonement began in Gethsemane and continued on Golgotha until the Savior himself declared on the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30). The immediate consequence of the Atonement was manifest in Christ’s resurrection, but the impact of the Atonement is felt each time one of our Father’s children experiences the miracle of forgiveness. We commemorate his atonement by partaking of two different sacramental symbols; the water symbolizes the “great drops of blood” that Christ shed from every pore (Luke 22:44), and the broken bread calls to our minds the Savior’s body broken upon the cross.

The prophets of the Book of Mormon teach us of two different kinds of restoration: a spiritual restoration, and a physical restoration.

Spiritual restoration. To his struggling son Corianton, Alma clearly explained that “it is requisite with the justice of God that men should be judged according to their works” (Alma 41:3). Thus, after the Resurrection and Judgment some will be “raised to happiness according to [their] desires of happiness …; and the other[s] to evil according to [their] desires of evil” (Alma 41:5). Continuing, Alma explicitly taught that “the meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous; just for that which is just; merciful for that which is merciful” (Alma 41:13). Alma cautioned Corianton not to suppose “that ye shall be restored from sin to happiness. Behold, I say unto you, wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10).

Amulek taught Zeezrom that “we shall be brought to stand before God, knowing even as we know now, and have a bright recollection of all our guilt” (Alma 11:43). Alma explained to his son Corianton that “the word restoration more fully condemneth the sinner, and justifieth him not at all” (Alma 41:15). That is the hard, wintry side of justice, judgment, and restoration.

But there is also a merciful side of restoration. Alma declared that “mercy cometh because of the atonement,” and though “justice exerciseth all his demands, … mercy claimeth all which is her own” upon conditions of true repentance. Alma then posed the provocative question: “What, do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you, Nay; not one whit. If so, God would cease to be God” (Alma 42:23–25).

It is impossible for each of us to overcome the demands of justice solely through our own individual efforts. Nevertheless, we have been promised that “it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Ne. 25:23). Contrary to the distorted doctrine of being saved solely through grace and by predestination, the Book of Mormon teaches us that we must strive to keep the commandments and repent of our sins, and then the Savior makes up the difference.

A necessary part of “all we can do” includes participation in essential ordinances of the gospel. Limited space will permit a discussion of only the first of these essential ordinances, which is baptism. Nephi eloquently explained that it was necessary for the Lamb of God “to be baptized by water, to fulfil all righteousness.” He then posed the soul-searching question, “O then, how much more need have we, being unholy, to be baptized, yea, even by water!” (2 Ne. 31:5.)

Little children are excluded from the requirement of baptism. Mormon clearly taught that they are “whole, for they are not capable of committing sin. …”

“[Therefore] teach parents that they must repent and be baptized, and humble themselves as their little children. …”

“And he that saith that little children need baptism denieth the mercies of Christ, and setteth at naught the atonement of him and the power of his redemption” (Moro. 8:8, 10, 20).

Physical restoration. In writing of the Resurrection,
Jacob taught the exquisite completeness of a physical restoration in which “the spirit and the body is restored to itself again, and all men become incorruptible, and immortal” (2 Ne. 9:13). Amulek also testified that in the Resurrection “the spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its [page 25] perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame. …

“And even there shall not so much as a hair of their heads be lost; but every thing shall be restored to its perfect frame” (Alma 11:43–44; see also Alma 40:23).

Notwithstanding the numerous New Testament witnesses of the Savior as a resurrected being following his crucifixion (see, for example, Luke 24:36–48), there still persists the fallacious doctrine formulated at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 that God the Father, his Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost are three personages of spirit—three personages in one. The sacred record of the Savior’s appearance to the ancient Nephites is an essential, additional witness of the true nature of the Son and of his relationship to the Father and to the Holy Ghost. After introducing himself as Jesus Christ, he who had taken upon himself the sins of the world (see 3 Ne. 11:11), he warmly invited the multitude to “come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet” (3 Ne. 11:14). The resurrected Christ had a glorified body of flesh and bone as certified by a multitude who “did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety and did bear record, that it was he” (3 Ne. 11:15).

Many churches which teach that the Father and Son are spirits further assume that after the Resurrection, all of us will remain as spirits. But Alma adds his testimony to those of Jacob and Amulek in testifying that “there is a space between death and the resurrection of the body, and a state of the soul in happiness or in misery until the time which is appointed of God that the dead shall come forth, and be reunited, both soul and body, and be brought to stand before God, and be judged according to their works” (Alma 40:21; emphasis added).

An Infinite Atonement

The Book of Mormon teaches us of an infinite atonement (see 2 Ne. 9:7; 2 Ne. 25:16; Alma 34:10, 12, 14), an atoning sacrifice by Christ that is unbounded by time, ethnicity, geography, or even kinds of sins, save for the unpardonable sin of denying the Holy Ghost (see Alma 39:6). The Resurrection includes all people “from the days of Adam down” to the end of time (Alma 40:18), those “both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female” (Alma 11:44). The Atonement is also infinite in the sense that the Savior not only overcame death and sin, but he also took upon himself “the pains and the sicknesses” and the “infirmities” of his people (Alma 7:11–12). The Atonement is infinite, too, in that because of the redemption made possible by his beloved Son, our Heavenly Father is able to forgive us “as often as [we] repent” (Mosiah 26:30–31; see also Moro. 6:8).

Through repentance we can become at one with Christ, or, as Jacob put it, we can “be reconciled unto him” (Jacob 4:11). Amaleki invited the people of his day—and us as well—to “come unto Christ … and partake of his salvation … and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him” (Omni 1:26). We become reconciled with him when we willingly give our souls to him as he offered his life for us.

After Aaron had taught the father of King Lamoni about the fall of man and of the plan of redemption and the Savior’s atoning sacrifice, the king prayed to God: “I will give away all my sins to know thee, and that I may be raised from the dead, and be saved at the last day” (Alma 22:18). That is precisely what each of us must do to become reconciled with our Savior: we must give away all our sins. Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has explained that “real, personal sacrifice never was placing an animal on the altar. Instead, it is a willingness to put the animal in us upon the altar and letting it be consumed!” (“Deny Yourselves of All Ungodliness,” Ensign, May 1995, p. 68.)

The Miracle of Forgiveness

When Elder Spencer W. Kimball of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles wrote The Miracle of Forgiveness, he could have entitled his book The Atonement of Jesus Christ, for it is through Christ’s atonement that forgiveness is wrought. Many of the titles applied to Jesus Christ reflect his atoning sacrifice—Savior, Redeemer, Mediator, Advocate with the Father, and Lamb of God, for example. Before his final departure from the Nephites, the Savior said: ‘Behold I have given unto you my gospel, and this is the gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father …”

“And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross … that I might draw all men unto me” (3 Ne. 27:13–14).

We read of the Savior’s first recorded miracle at the wedding in Cana when he changed the water to wine (see John 2:1–11). But he performs daily miracles of even greater significance each time a prospective elder comes forth with a broken heart and contrite spirit and, through the grace of God, is able to receive forgiveness and
determine to follow the Lord with full purpose of heart. The Lord himself revealed to Alma that “as often as my people repent will I forgive them their trespasses against me.

“And ye shall also forgive one another your trespasses; for verily I say unto you, he that forgiveth not his neighbor’s trespasses when he says that he repents, the same hath brought himself under condemnation” (Mosiah 26:30–31).

Does this mean that I am expected to forgive my neighbor whose dog dug up my garden? Yes! Is an injured wife required to forgive her unfaithful husband? Yes! Are parents required to forgive their prodigal child who has besmirched their good family name? Yes! Are children required to forgive abusive parents? Yes! Must I really forgive a business associate who bilks me out of my pension? Yes!

But where do we acquire the spiritual and emotional strength to forgive those who have offended us and sinned against us? Mormon provides the prescription: “Pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love … ; that when [Christ] shall appear we shall be like him … ; that we may be purified even as he is pure” (Moro. 7:48).

The goal of the great plan of happiness is to become like Christ so that we may someday dwell in his presence and in the presence of our Heavenly Father. An unforgiving and vengeful heart is unholy, as is the heart of an adulterer or someone addicted to pornography. Any inability we might have to forgive others becomes a barrier between us and the Savior. If we are to become like him, we must freely forgive others as he has forgiven us (see 3 Ne. 13:11; D&C 64:10).

From Precept to Practice

It is, of course, always easier to speak of Christlike attributes in the abstract than to practice them in the heat of battle, but if we are to become like Christ, we must learn to forgive as he forgave.

While living in Germany, Sister Condie and I became acquainted with a marvelous couple from Switzerland, Brother Georg and Sister Annaroesli Birsfelder, who were serving in the Frankfurt temple. In February 1991, at the end of their temple shift, Brother and Sister Birsfelder were taking a stroll together down one of the little streets in Friedrichsdorf near the temple. Suddenly a car driven by an elderly man swerved around the corner, over the curb, and onto the sidewalk. The car struck Sister Birsfelder, and the momentum hurled her through the thick plate glass door of a store. She was rushed to the hospital, where she was treated for a double skull fracture, a concussion, and a severely injured eye.

For seven weeks she lay in a coma, unaware of her surroundings. Georg stayed at her bedside as much as possible, petting her hand gently and speaking to her in tones of love and encouragement. Though many of us feared the worst, we were heartened by Brother Birsfelder’s faith and undaunted optimism. Finally she opened her eyes. Two months after the accident, she began to speak and to eat solid food. Later, she was able to stand up and take a few steps and converse once again in English, German, and French. It was a miracle! Our prayers had been answered.

She still experienced considerable pain, and it was apparent that she had permanently lost the sight of her right eye. Three months after the accident, the driver of the car came to visit her in the hospital. Filled with anxiety and fear of legal reprisals, he asked, “Do you hate me for what I have done to you?” He was not prepared for her reply: “Do you know who I am? I am a Mormon. In our religion we learn to love and forgive one another. I am convinced you didn’t intentionally harm me. No,” she said, “I don’t hate you. I love you and forgive you.”

The elderly man had a heavy burden lifted that day, for he knew that his erratic driving had nearly cost a human life. But now he had received forgiveness from the person he had seriously injured. He was so relieved that he went to the minister of the local Huguenot church in Friedrichsdorf and told him of the magnanimous heart of Annaroesli Birsfelder. The Huguenot minister told his congregation of Sister Birsfelder’s forgiving heart and of how this dear Latter-day Saint had been an example to all of us by tempering justice with mercy.

Our Savior, at the close of his brief ministry among the Nephites, posed the following soul-searching question: “What manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Ne. 27:27). And what manner of Son was he? Abinadi foresaw that Christ would suffer but not yield to temptation. He would “be mocked, and scourged, and cast out, and disowned by his people” (Mosiah 15:5). He would be “crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7).

When our will is swallowed up in the will of the Father and of the Son, then we are truly reconciled unto them. We will then be full partakers of the Savior’s atonement and experience the greatest miracle of all—the miracle of forgiveness.