

The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness

President Boyd K. Packer

Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles



Boyd K. Packer, "The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness," Ensign, Nov. 1995, 18

In April of 1847, Brigham Young led the first company of pioneers out of Winter Quarters. At that same time, sixteen hundred miles to the west the pathetic survivors of the Donner Party straggled down the slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains into the Sacramento Valley.

They had spent the ferocious winter trapped in the snowdrifts below the summit. That any survived the days and weeks and months of starvation and indescribable suffering is almost beyond belief.

Among them was fifteen-year-old John Breen. On the night of April 24 he walked into Johnson's Ranch. Years later John wrote:

"It was long after dark when we got to Johnson's Ranch, so the first time I saw it was early in the morning. The weather was fine, the ground was covered with green grass, the birds were singing from the tops of the trees, and the journey was over. I could scarcely believe that I was alive.

"The scene that I saw that morning seems to be photographed on my mind. Most of the incidents are gone from memory, but I can always see the camp near Johnson's Ranch." 1

At first I was very puzzled by his statement that "most of the incidents are gone from memory." How could long months of incredible suffering and sorrow ever be gone from his mind? How could that brutal dark winter be replaced with one brilliant morning?

On further reflection I decided it was not puzzling at all. I have seen something similar happen to people

I have known. I have seen some who have spent a long winter of guilt and spiritual starvation emerge into the morning of forgiveness.

When morning came, they learned this:

“Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more.” 2

“I, *even I, am* he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.” 3

“I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” 4

“For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.” 5

When the prophet Alma was young, he spent such a time “*racked,*” as he said, “*with eternal torment, [his] soul ... harrowed up to the greatest degree.*” 6

He even thought, “*Oh, ... that I could be banished and become extinct both soul and body.*” 7

But his mind caught hold of a thought. When he nurtured the thought and acted upon it, the morning of forgiveness came, and he said:

“I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.

“And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!” 8

Letters come from those who have made tragic mistakes. They ask, “Can I *ever* be forgiven?”

The answer is *yes!*

The gospel teaches us that relief from torment and guilt can be earned through repentance. Save for those few who defect to perdition after having known a fulness, there is no habit, no addiction, no rebellion, no transgression, no offense exempted from the promise of complete forgiveness.

“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” That is, Isaiah continued, “if ye be willing and obedient.” 9

Even that grace of God promised in the scriptures comes only “after all we can do.” 10

You may tell yourself that your transgressions are not spiritually illegal. That will not work; neither will rebellion, nor anger, nor joking about them. You cannot do that. And you don't have to do it.

There is a way back. It will not help if, out of tender regard for your feelings, I avoid telling you about the hard part.

John Breen did not come to that morning at Johnson's Ranch simply by desiring it. He wallowed and clawed his way up over the pass, suffering every step of the way. But once he knew he would survive and the suffering would end, surely he did not complain at the ordeal. And he had help all the way down. He was with rescuers.

When an offense is minor, so simple a thing as an apology will satisfy the law. Most mistakes can be settled between us and the Lord, and that should be done speedily. 11 It requires a confession to Him, and whatever obvious repairs need to be made.

With sincere repentance as a pattern in our lives, measured by our willingness to “confess them and forsake them,” 12 the Lord has promised that we may “always *retain* a remission of [our] sins.” 13

Alma bluntly told his wayward son that “repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment.” 14

The punishment may, for the most part, consist of the torment we inflict upon ourselves. It may be the loss of privilege or progress. 15 (For further information, see additional text in this endnote.) We are punished *by* our sins, if not *for* them.

There are some transgressions which require a discipline which will bring about the relief that comes with the morning of forgiveness. If your mistakes have been grievous ones, go to your bishop. Like the rescuers who brought John Breen down from the mountaintops, bishops can guide you through the steps required to obtain forgiveness insofar as the Church is concerned. Each one of us must work out individually forgiveness from the Lord.

To earn forgiveness, one must make restitution. That means you give back what you have taken or ease the pain of those you have injured.

But sometimes you *cannot* give back what you have taken because you don't have it to give. If you have caused others to suffer unbearably—defiled someone's virtue, for example—it is not within your power to give it back.

There are times you cannot mend that which you have broken. Perhaps the offense was long ago, or the

injured refused your penance. Perhaps the damage was so severe that you cannot fix it no matter how desperately you want to.

Your repentance cannot be accepted unless there is a restitution. If you cannot undo what you have done, you are trapped. It is easy to understand how helpless and hopeless you then feel and why you might want to give up, just as Alma did.

The thought that rescued Alma, when he acted upon it, is this: Restoring what you cannot restore, healing the wound you cannot heal, fixing that which you broke and you cannot fix is the very purpose of the atonement of Christ.

When your desire is firm and you are willing to pay the “uttermost farthing,” ¹⁶ the law of restitution is suspended. Your obligation is transferred to the Lord. He will settle your accounts.

I repeat, save for the exception of the very few who defect to perdition, there is no habit, no addiction, no rebellion, no transgression, no apostasy, no crime exempted from the promise of complete forgiveness. That is the promise of the atonement of Christ.

How all can be repaired, we do not know. It may not all be accomplished in this life. We know from visions and visitations that the servants of the Lord continue the work of redemption beyond the veil. ¹⁷

This knowledge should be as comforting to the innocent as it is to the guilty. I am thinking of parents who suffer unbearably for the mistakes of their wayward children and are losing hope.

Some members wonder why their priesthood leaders will not accept them just as they are and simply comfort them in what they call pure Christian love.

Pure Christian love, the love of Christ, does not presuppose approval of all conduct. Surely the ordinary experiences of parenthood teach that one can be consumed with love for another and yet be unable to approve unworthy conduct.

We cannot, as a church, approve unworthy conduct or accept into full fellowship individuals who live or who teach standards that are grossly in violation of that which the Lord requires of Latter-day Saints.

If we, out of sympathy, should approve unworthy conduct, it might give present comfort to someone but would not ultimately contribute to that person’s happiness. ¹⁸

In the most tender of sermons in the revelations on kindness and long-suffering, on meekness, gentleness, on love unfeigned, the Lord instructs us to reprove “betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then [show] forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved.”

The Lord provides ways to pay our debts to Him. In one sense we ourselves may participate in an atonement. When we are willing to restore to others that which we have not taken, or heal wounds that we did not inflict, or pay a debt that we did not incur, we are emulating His part in the Atonement.

So many live with accusing guilt when relief is ever at hand. So many are like the immigrant woman who skimped and saved and deprived herself until, by selling all of her possessions, she bought a steerage-class ticket to America.

She rationed out the meager provisions she was able to bring with her. Even so, they were gone early in the voyage. When others went for their meals, she stayed below deck—determined to suffer through it. Finally, on the last day, she must, she thought, afford one meal to give her strength for the journey yet ahead. When she asked what the meal would cost, she was told that all of the meals had been included in the price of her ticket.

That great morning of forgiveness may not come at once. Do not give up if at first you fail. Often the most difficult part of repentance is to forgive yourself. Discouragement is part of that test. Do not give up. That brilliant morning will come.

Then “the peace of God, which passeth ... understanding” comes into your life once again. ²⁰ Then you, like Him, will remember your sins no more. How will you know? You will know! ²¹

Some years ago I was in Washington, D.C., with President Harold B. Lee. Early one morning he called me to come into his hotel room. He was sitting in his robe reading *Gospel Doctrine*, by President Joseph F. Smith, and he said, “Listen to this!

“‘Jesus had not finished his work when his body was slain, neither did he finish it after his resurrection from the dead; although he had accomplished the purpose for which he then came to the earth, he had not fulfilled all his work. And when will he? Not until he has redeemed and saved every son and daughter of our father Adam that have been or ever will be born upon this earth to the end of time, except the sons of perdition. That is his mission. We will not finish *our* work until we have saved ourselves, and then not until we shall have saved all depending upon us; for we are to become saviors upon Mount Zion, as well as Christ. We are called to this mission.’” ²²

“There is never a time,” the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “when the spirit is too old to approach God. *All are within the reach of pardoning mercy, who have not committed the unpardonable sin.*” ²³

And so we pray, and we fast, and we plead, and we implore. We love those who wander, and we never give up hope.

I bear witness of Christ and of the power of His atonement. And I know that “his anger kindleth against the wicked; they repent, and in a moment it is turned away, and they are in his favor, and he giveth them

life; therefore, weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”²⁴ In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Gospel topics: Jesus Christ, Atonement, forgiveness, love, repentance, sin

© 2003 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved.

15. Forgiveness will come eventually to all repentant souls who have not committed the unpardonable sin (see Matt. 12:31). Forgiveness does not, however, necessarily assure exaltation, as is the case with David (see D&C 132:38-39; see also Ps. 16:10; Acts 2:25-27; Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 339).