

Sin and Suffering

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We are concerned that some people have a very lax attitude toward sin. Some young people say, "I'll just do what I want now, and then I'll repent quickly and go on a mission [or get married in the temple], and everything will be all right."

Young people are not the only ones with a lax attitude toward sin. We know of mature members of the Church who commit serious transgressions knowingly and deliberately, relying on their supposed ability to repent speedily and be "as good as new." Such persons want the present convenience or enjoyment of sin and the future effects of righteousness, in that order. They want to experience the sin but avoid its effects.

The Book of Mormon describes such persons: "And there shall also be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin; yea, lie a little, take the advantage of one because of his words, dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this; and do all these things, for tomorrow we die; and if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God" (2 Ne. 28:8).

The attitudes and positions of such persons are exactly opposite those of the Savior, who never experienced sin, but whose atoning sacrifice subjected him to all of its anguish.

Sins that Block Progress

To minimize misunderstanding, I will give some illustrations of the kinds of things I mean when I refer to sin or transgression. In its widest application, sin includes every irregularity of behavior, every source of uncleanness. But many things that are sins under this widest definition are just grains of sand that do not block our progress on the path toward eternal life. The sins I refer to, however, are the serious transgressions, the boulder-size obstacles that block the path and cannot be removed without prolonged repentance.

During one week, a knowledgeable observer listed some of the crimes reported in a Utah newspaper and then crossed off those where the accused was not a member of the Church. The remaining list provides illustrations of the kinds of sins in which Latter-day Saints are involved:

- Fraud
- Sale of illegal drugs
- Aggravated assault
- Aggravated kidnapping

- Sexual abuse
- A professional having sexual relations with a client

Church disciplinary records make us aware of other serious transgressions rarely reported in the press: adultery, fornication, polygamy, and apostasy.

To the Nephites, the Savior spoke of the final judgment, when he would “be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages” (3 Ne. 24:5).

Those are some illustrations of serious transgressions. Others could be given.

Basic Principles

As background, let us review some familiar principles.

1. One of the principal purposes of this life is for God to test his children, to see whether we will keep his commandments. (See Abr. 3:25.)
2. Therefore, this life is “a probationary time,” as Alma called it, “a time to repent and serve God” (Alma 42:4).
3. The breaking of a commandment of God is sin.
4. In the final judgment, we will stand before God to be judged according to our works. (See Alma 11:41; 3 Ne. 26:4; D&C 19:3.)
5. For every sin there is “a punishment affixed.” (Alma 42:18; see also Amos 3:1-2.)
6. Those who have broken the commandments of God and have not repented in this life will “stand with shame and awful guilt before the bar of God” (Jacob 6:9). They will have “an awful view of their own guilt and abominations” (Mosiah 3:25). The scriptures describe this as “a lively sense of ... guilt, and pain, and anguish, which is like an unquenchable fire, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever” (Mosiah 2:38).
7. The awful demands of justice upon those who have violated the laws of God, the “state of misery and endless torment” (Mosiah 3:25) described in these scriptures, can be mediated by the atonement of Jesus Christ. This is the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What do these basic principles mean in the case of a lax Latter-day Saint who deliberately commits a serious transgression in the expectation that he or she will enjoy the effects or benefits of the sin now and then make a speedy and relatively painless repentance and soon be as good as new?

The Book of Mormon teaches that the Savior does not redeem men “in their sins” (Alma 11:34, 36, 37; Hel. 5:10). “The wicked remain as though there had been no redemption made, except it be the loosing of the bands of death” (Alma 11:41). The Savior came to redeem men “from their sins because of repentance” and upon the “conditions of repentance” (Hel. 5:11; italics added).

One of those conditions of repentance is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, including faith in, and reliance upon, his atoning sacrifice. As Amulek taught: “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 34:16).

Personal Suffering for Sin

Another condition of repentance is suffering or punishment for the sin. In the words of Alma, “Repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment” (Alma 42:16). Where there has been sin, there must be suffering.

Perhaps the greatest statement of this principle in all the scriptures is the revelation the Lord gave to the Prophet Joseph Smith in March 1830. (See D&C 19.) Here the Lord reminds us of the “great day of judgment” when all will be judged according to their works (D&C 19:3). He explains that the “endless” or “eternal” torment or punishment that comes from sin is not punishment without end. It is the punishment of God, who is endless and eternal. (See D&C 19:10-12.)

In this setting, the Savior of the world commands us to repent and keep his commandments. “Repent,” he commands, “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.

“Wherefore, I command you again to repent, lest I humble you with my almighty power; and that you confess your sins, lest you suffer these punishments of which I have spoken” (D&C 19:15-20).

Bearing the Burden

As we consider these sobering words of the Savior, we realize that there is something very peculiar about the state of mind or “heart” of the person who deliberately commits sin in the expectation that he or she will speedily and comfortably repent and continue as a servant of God, preaching repentance and asking others to come unto Christ. I will illustrate the peculiarity of this attitude with an analogy.

The mother of a large family is burdened almost past the point of endurance. Every waking hour is spent serving the needs of her large family: meals, mending, transporting, counseling, caring for those who are sick, comforting those who mourn, and administering to every other need a mother can understand. She has committed herself to do everything within her power to serve the needs of her children.

She is giving her life for them. The children know she will attempt to carry whatever load is placed upon her. Most of them are considerate and do all they can to minimize her burden. But some, knowing of her willingness to serve, heedlessly pile more and more tasks on the weary mother. “Don’t worry about it” is their attitude; “she’ll carry it. She said she would. Let Mom do it, and we’ll just have a good time.”

In this analogy, I am obviously likening the heedless children to those who sin in the expectation that someone else will bear the burden of suffering. The one who bears the burden is our Savior.

No Free Ride

Am I suggesting that the benefits of the Atonement are not available for the person who heedlessly sins? Of course not. But I am suggesting that there is a relationship between sin and suffering that is not understood by people who knowingly sin in the expectation that all the burden of suffering will be borne by Another, that the sin is all theirs but that the suffering is all His. That is not the way. Repentance, which is an assured passage to an eternal destination, is nevertheless not a free ride.

Let us recall two scriptures:

- (1) “Repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment” (Alma 42:16); and
- (2) the Savior said that he had 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” (D&C 19:16-17).

This obviously means that the unrepentant transgressor must suffer for his own sins. Does it also mean that a person who repents does not need to suffer at all because the entire punishment is borne by the Savior? That cannot be the meaning because it would be inconsistent with the Savior’s other teachings. What is meant is that the person who repents does not need to suffer “even as” the Savior suffered for that sin. Sinners who are repenting will experience some suffering, but because of their repentance and the Atonement, they will not experience the full, “exquisite” extent of eternal torment the Savior suffered.

President Spencer W. Kimball, who gave such comprehensive teachings on repentance and forgiveness, said that personal suffering “is a very important part of repentance. One has not

begun to repent until he has suffered intensely for his sins. ... If a person hasn't suffered, he hasn't repented" (The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982, pages 88, 99).

The Savior taught this principle when he said that his atoning sacrifice was for "all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered" (2 Ne. 2:7). The repentant sinner who comes to Christ with a broken heart and a contrite spirit has been through a process of personal pain and suffering for sin. He understands the meaning of Alma's statement that "none but the truly penitent are saved" (Alma 42:24).

Godly Sorrow

Bruce C. Hafen has described how some people look "for shortcuts [to repentance] and easy answers, thinking that quick confessions or breezy apologies alone are enough" (The Broken Heart, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989, page 150). President Kimball said, "Very frequently people think they have repented and are worthy of forgiveness when all they have done is to express sorrow or regret at the unfortunate happening" (Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, page 87). There is a big difference between the "godly sorrow [that] worketh repentance" (2 Cor. 7:10), which involves personal suffering, and the easy and relatively painless sorrow for being caught, or the misplaced sorrow Mormon described as "the sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin" (Morm. 2:13).

Alma the Younger certainly understood that easy and painless sorrow was not a sufficient basis for repentance. His experience, related in detail in the Book of Mormon, is our best scriptural illustration of the fact that the process of repentance is filled with personal suffering for sin.

Alma said that after he was stopped in his wicked course, he was "in the darkest abyss" (Mosiah 27:29), "racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sins.

"Yea, I did remember all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell" (Alma 36:12-13).

He tells how "the very thought of coming into the presence of ... God did rack [his] soul with inexpressible horror" (Alma 36:14). He speaks of being "harrowed up by the memory of [his] many sins" (Alma 36:17). After three days and three nights of what he called "the most bitter pain and anguish of soul," he cried out to the Lord Jesus Christ for mercy and received "a remission of [his] sins" (Alma 38:8).

All of our personal experience confirms the fact that we must endure personal suffering in the process of repentance—and for serious transgressions, that suffering can be severe and prolonged.

A repenting transgressor who was excommunicated describes his personal feelings: he speaks of "tearful hours," "wish[ing] to be covered by a million mountains," "crushed by the shame," "dark blackness," and "anguish ... as wide as eternity."

Why Suffering is Necessary

Why is it necessary for us to suffer on the way to repentance for serious transgressions? We tend to think of the results of repentance as simply cleansing us from sin. But that is an incomplete view of the matter. A person who sins is like a tree that bends easily in the wind. On a windy and rainy day, the tree bends so deeply against the ground that the leaves become soiled with mud, like sin. If we focus only on cleaning the leaves, the weakness in the tree that allowed it to bend and soil its leaves may remain. Similarly, a person who is merely sorry to be soiled by sin will sin again in the next high wind. The susceptibility to repetition continues until the tree has been strengthened.

When a person has gone through the process that results in what the scriptures call a broken heart and a contrite spirit, the Savior does more than cleanse that person from sin. He also gives him or her new strength. That strengthening is essential for us to realize the purpose of the cleansing, which is to return to our Heavenly Father. To be admitted to his presence, we must be more than clean. We must also be changed from a morally weak person who has sinned into a strong person with the spiritual stature to dwell in the presence of God. We must, as the scripture says, “[become] a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord” (Mosiah 3:19). This is what the scripture means in its explanation that a person who has repented of his sins will “forsake them” (D&C 58:43). Forsaking sins is more than resolving not to repeat them. Forsaking involves a fundamental change in the individual.

A Mighty Change of Heart

King Benjamin and Alma both speak of a mighty change of heart. King Benjamin’s congregation described that mighty change by saying that they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). Alma illustrated that change of heart when he described a people who “awoke unto God,” “put their trust in” him, and were “faithful until the end” (Alma 5:7, 13). He challenged others to “look forward with an eye of faith” to the time when we will “stand before God to be judged” according to our deeds (Alma 5:15). Persons who have had that kind of change in their hearts have attained the strength and stature to dwell with God. That is what we call being saved.

Heed the Warnings

Some Latter-day Saints who wrongly think repentance is easy maintain that a person is better off after he has sinned and repented. “Get a little experience with sin,” one argument goes, “and then you will be better able to counsel and sympathize with others. You can always repent.”

I plead with you, my brothers and sisters, my young friends and my older friends, avoid transgression! The idea that one can deliberately sin and easily repent or that one is better off after sinning and repenting are devilish lies of the adversary. Would anyone seriously contend that it is better to learn firsthand that a certain blow will break a bone or a certain mixture of chemicals will explode and burn off our skin? Are we better off after we have sustained and been scarred from such injuries? It is obviously better to heed the warnings of wise persons who

know the effects of certain traumas on our bodies.

Just as we can benefit from someone else's experience in matters such as these, we can also benefit from the warnings contained in the commandments of God. We don't have to have personal experience with the effects of serious transgressions to know that they are injurious to our souls and destructive of our eternal welfare.

Some years ago, one of our sons asked me why it wasn't a good idea to try alcohol or tobacco to see what they were like. He knew about the Word of Wisdom, and he also knew the health effects of these substances, but he was questioning why he shouldn't just try them out for himself. I replied that if he wanted to try something out, he ought to go to a barnyard and eat a little manure. He recoiled in horror. "Ooh, that's sickening," he reacted.

"I'm glad you think so," I said, "but why don't you just try it out so you will know for yourself? While you're proposing to try one thing that you know is not good for you, why don't you apply that principle to some others?" That illustration of the silliness of "trying it out for yourself" proved persuasive for one sixteen-year-old.

Do Not Burden Your Tomorrows

When we are young, we sometimes behave as if there were no tomorrow. When we are young, it is easy to forget that we will grow up, marry, raise a family, and—note this significant point—continue to associate with some of the same people who are witnesses to, or participants in, our teenage pranks or transgressions.

Young men, the girl you are dating may be your wife in a few years, but probably she will not. Possibly she will turn out to be the wife of your bishop or your stake president. Young women, the fellow you are dating may turn out to be your husband, but more likely he will not. He may turn out to be the husband of your sister or your best friend. He may even be a counselor in your bishopric or an employee you supervise at your place of work. Conduct your life today so your tomorrows are not burdened with bad or embarrassing memories.

"He Who Has Repented"

Most of what I have discussed has been addressed to persons who think that repentance is easy. At the opposite extreme are those who think that repentance is too hard. Those souls are so tenderhearted and conscientious that they see sin everywhere in their own lives, and they despair of ever being able to be clean. A call for repentance that is clear enough and loud enough to encourage reformation for the lax can produce paralyzing discouragement for the conscientious. This is a common problem. We address a diverse audience each time we speak, and we are never free from the reality that a doctrinal underdose for some is an overdose for others.

I will conclude with a message of hope that is true for all, but especially needed for those who think that repentance is too hard.

Repentance is a continuing process, needed by all because “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Repentance is possible, and then forgiveness is certain.

Elder Spencer W. Kimball said: “Sometimes ... when a repentant one looks back and sees the ugliness, the loathsomeness of the transgression, he is almost overwhelmed and wonders, ‘Can the Lord ever forgive me? Can I ever forgive myself?’ But when one reaches the depths of despondency and feels the hopelessness of his position, and when he cries out to God for mercy in helplessness but in faith, there comes a still, small, but penetrating voice whispering to his soul, ‘Thy sins are forgiven thee’ ” (The Miracle of Forgiveness, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969, page 344).

When this happens, how precious the promise that God will “[take] away the guilt from our hearts, through the merits of his Son” (Alma 24:10).

How comforting the promise that “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isa. 1:18).

How glorious God’s own promise that “he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more” (D&C 58:42; see also Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:12).

These things are true. I testify of Jesus Christ, who made it all possible and who gave us the conditions of repentance and the pathway to perfection provided by his atoning sacrifice.