

Believing Christ

By Stephen E. Robinson

To have faith in Jesus Christ, we must learn to believe his promise of eternal life.

One of the most terrifying dilemmas in the universe consists of two facts. The first is expressed in Doctrine and Covenants 1:31: “I the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance.” [D&C 1:31] That means he can’t tolerate it. He can’t blink or look the other way. The other fact is very simply put: We all sin. If the equation consisted of only those two facts, the conclusion would be inescapable: As sinful beings, we can never enter God’s presence.

But that is not all there is. There is the atonement of Jesus Christ—that glorious plan by which this dilemma can be resolved.

And the amazing thing is that the Atonement works in practical ways.

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When my son Michael was six or seven, he did something I thought was wrong. He is my only son, and I want him to be better than his dad was. So when he slipped up, I sent him to his room with the instructions, “Don’t you dare come out until I come and get you!”

And then I forgot. Some hours later, as I was watching television, I heard his door open and tentative footsteps coming down the hall. I slapped my forehead and ran to meet him. There he was with swollen eyes and tears on his cheeks. He looked up at me—not quite sure he should have come out—and said, “Dad, can’t we ever be friends again?” I melted and pulled him to me. He’s my boy, and I love him.

We all do things that disappoint our Father in Heaven, that separate us from his presence, his Spirit. There are times when we get sent to our rooms, spiritually though not physically. When that happens, we sometimes lift up our eyes and say, “O Father, can’t we ever be friends again?” The answer, found in all the scriptures, is a resounding “Yes—through the atonement of Christ.” I particularly like the way it is put in Isaiah 1:18: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” [Isa. 1:18]

To have faith in Jesus Christ is not merely to believe that he is who he says he is. It is not merely to believe *in* Christ; we must also *believe* Christ. Both as a bishop and as a teacher, I have heard several variations on a theme of doubt. Some have said, “Bishop, I’ve sinned too horribly. I’ll be active in the Church, and I hope for some reward. But I couldn’t ever hope to be exalted after what I’ve done.” Others have said, “I’m weak and imperfect. I don’t have all the talents that Brother Jones (or Sister Smith) does. I’ll never be the bishop (or the Relief Society president). I’m just average. I expect my reward in eternity will be a little lower than theirs.”

All of these are variations on the same theme: “I do not believe Christ can do what he claims. I have no faith in his ability to exalt me.”

I once counseled a man who said, “Bishop, I’m just not celestial material.” Well, I’d heard those words once too often,

so I said, “You’re not celestial material? Welcome to the club. Not one of us is! Not one of us qualifies on our own for the presence of God. So why don’t you admit your real problem? Why don’t you admit that you don’t believe Christ can do what he says he can do?”

He got angry. “I have a testimony of Jesus!”

I said, “Yes, you believe in Christ. You simply do not *believe* Christ. He says that even though you are not celestial, he can make you celestial—but you don’t believe it.”

Why He Is Called the Savior

Sometimes the demand for perfection drives us to despair. More than a decade ago, my wife and I were living in Pennsylvania. Things seemed to be going well. I’d been promoted in my work and was also serving in the bishopric. Janet had given birth to our fourth child, had graduated from college, had passed the CPA exam, and had been called to serve as Relief Society president. We were busy but happy, and I thought we were doing the right things.

Then my wife began to feel an overpowering sense of discouragement. She asked to be released from her callings, and try as I might, I could not get her to tell me what was wrong.

One night, after two weeks of being prodded by a sometimes insensitive but worried husband, she finally said, “All right. You want to know what’s wrong? I can’t do it anymore. I can’t get up at 5:30 in the morning to bake bread and help my kids with their homework and do my own homework. I can’t do my Relief Society stuff and get my genealogy done and sew and go to the PTA meetings and write the missionaries. ...”

She added, “I don’t have the talent that Sister Morrell has. I can’t do what Sister Childs does. I try not to yell at the kids, but I do. I’m not perfect, and I’m never going to be perfect. I’m afraid I’m not going to make it to the celestial kingdom.”

I said, “Janet, I know you have a testimony. ...”

“Of course I do! That’s what’s so terrible. I know the gospel’s true. I just can’t do it. I’ve tried and I’ve tried, but I can’t do it all, all of the time.”

It was a long night. At last we came to understand what was wrong. We realized, after talking together, that Janet was trying to save herself. She knew that Jesus is an adviser and a teacher. She knew that he is an example, the head of the Church, our Elder Brother, and even God. She knew all that, but she did not understand His role as the Savior.

We all fail at living the full celestial level. That’s why we need a Savior. The Lord says, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.” (Matt. 5:6.) We frequently misinterpret that verse. We think it means “Blessed are the righteous.” It does not. When are you hungry? When are you thirsty? When you don’t have the object of your desire. It is those who *don’t* have the righteousness that God has—but *who hunger and thirst after it*—who are blessed, for if that is the desire of their hearts, the Lord will help them achieve it.

Becoming One with Christ

Perfection comes through the atonement of Jesus Christ. That happens as we become one with him, a perfect being. It is like a merger. If you take a small, bankrupt firm that is about to go under and merge it with a corporate giant, what

happens? Their assets and liabilities flow together, and the new entity that is created is solvent.

This is similar to what happens spiritually when we enter into a covenant with the Savior. We have liabilities; he has assets. So he proposes a covenant relationship. Jesus is sometimes called the Bridegroom and the Church the Bride, because of their close association under the covenant. After the covenant is made, I become one with Christ, and as partners we work together toward my exaltation. My liabilities and his assets flow into each other. I do all that I can do, and he does what I cannot yet do. For now, in partnership we are perfect, through His perfection.

What heavier burden is there than the demand we sometimes place on ourselves to be perfect now, in this life? But Jesus proposes: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11:28–30.)

Trust Me

Nephi was one of the great prophets, yet he recognized his need for the Savior. In 2 Nephi 4:17–18, we read of his anguish: “O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.

“I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.” [2 Ne. 4:17–18]

Did Nephi understand his mortal condition?

Oh, yes. But the key to his greatness is what comes next: “Nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted.” (2 Ne. 4:19.)

I had a friend who used to say frequently, “Well, I figure my life is half over and I’m halfway to the celestial kingdom, so I’m right on schedule.”

One day I asked her, “What happens if you die tomorrow?” It was the first time the thought had occurred to her.

“Let’s see, halfway to the celestial kingdom is ... mid-terrestrial! That’s not good enough!”

We need to know that because of the covenant we have made with the Savior, if we should die tomorrow, we still have hope of the celestial kingdom. That hope is one of the promised blessings of our covenant relationship. Yet many of us do not understand that promise or take advantage of it.

When our twin daughters were young, Janet and I decided to teach them to swim. I started with Rebekah. As we went down into the public pool together, I thought, “I’m going to teach her to swim.” But she thought, “I’m going to drown!” The water was only three and one-half feet deep, but Becky was only three feet tall. She was so terrified that she began to scream and kick. She was unteachable.

Finally, I held her close and said, “Becky, I’ve got you. I’m your dad. I love you. I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you. Now relax.” And bless her heart, she relaxed. She trusted me. I put my arms under her and said, “Okay, now kick your legs.” And she began to learn how to swim.

Spiritually, some of us are so terrified by the questions “Am I celestial? Am I going to make it?” that we cannot make any progress. We’re petrified by our fear. But if we’re trying to follow his teachings and paying attention, we can

almost feel the Savior's arms around us and feel those assurances as the Spirit whispers of the Savior's love for us: I love you. Trust me. And if we do trust him, he can begin to help us live the gospel. It is as if he supports us, whispering through the Spirit: Okay, now attend sacrament meeting. Very good. Now accept a call to serve. And so we begin to make progress.

Alma 34:14–16 makes it clear that Christ's atonement was infinite and eternal. As such, it enables mercy to overpower justice so we can have the faith to repent. "And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles [us] in the arms of safety."

"The arms of safety"—that is my favorite phrase from the Book of Mormon.

Do Latter-day Saints believe in being saved? Of course we do. That's why Jesus is called the Savior. What good is it to have a Savior if no one is saved? It's like having a lifeguard that won't get out of the chair.

The great truth of the gospel is that we have a Savior who can and will save us from ourselves, from what we lack, from our imperfections, from the carnality within us, if we seek his help. In vision, Joseph Smith described those in the celestial kingdom in these terms:

"These are they whose names are written in heaven, where God and Christ are the judge of all.

"These are they who are just men made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant." (D&C 76:68–69.)

Just men and women—those who hunger and thirst after righteousness—*made* perfect through Jesus Christ, our mediator.

Give Him All

As my wife and I talked that night about feelings of inadequacy, I groped for some way to help. I finally remembered something that had happened a couple of months earlier. In our home it is now called the parable of the bicycle.

I was sitting in a chair reading. My daughter, Sarah, who was seven years old at the time, came in and said, "Dad, can I have a bike? I'm the only kid on the block who doesn't have one."

Well, I didn't have the money then for a bike, so I stalled her. I said, "Sure, Sarah."

She said, "How? When?"

I said, "You save all your pennies, and soon you'll have enough for a bike." And she went away.

A couple of weeks later I was sitting in the same chair when I heard a "clink, clink" in Sarah's bedroom. I asked, "Sarah, what are you doing?"

She came to me with a little jar, a slit cut in the lid, and a bunch of pennies in the bottom. She said, "You promised me that if I saved all my pennies, pretty soon I'd have enough for a bike. And, Daddy, I've saved every single one of them."

My heart melted. My daughter was doing everything in her power to follow my instructions. I hadn't actually lied to her. If she saved all of her pennies, she would eventually have enough for a bike, but by then she would want a car. I said, "Let's go look at bikes."

We went to every store in town. Finally we found it—the *perfect* bicycle. She was thrilled. Then she saw the price tag, and her face fell. She started to cry. “Oh, Dad, I’ll never have enough for a bicycle!”

So I said, “Sarah, how much *do* you have?”

She answered, “Sixty-one cents.”

“I’ll tell you what. You give me everything you’ve got and a hug and a kiss, and the bike is yours.” Then I drove home very slowly because she insisted on riding the bike home.

As I drove beside her, I thought of the atonement of Christ. We all desperately want the celestial kingdom. We want to be with our Father in Heaven. But no matter how hard we try, we come up short. At some point all of us must realize, “I can’t do this by myself. I need help.” Then it is that the Savior says, in effect, All right, you’re not perfect. But what *can* you do? Give me all you have, and I’ll do the rest.

He still requires our best effort. We must keep trying. But the good news is that having done all we can, it is enough. We may not be personally perfect yet, but because of our covenant with the Savior, we can rely on *his* perfection, and his perfection will get us through.

As Janet and I internalized how the Atonement works, we wept. “I’ve always believed that Jesus suffered and died for me,” Janet said. “But now I realize that he must save me from myself, from my sins and my weaknesses.”

I rejoice in the words of 2 Nephi 2:8: “There is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah.” [2 Ne. 2:8] There is no other way. Many of us are trying to save ourselves, holding the atonement of Jesus Christ at arm’s distance and saying, “When I’ve perfected myself, then I’ll be worthy of the Atonement.” But that’s not how it works. That’s like saying, “I won’t take the medicine until I’m well. I’ll be worthy of it then.”

One of my favorite hymns reads: “Dearly, dearly has he loved! And we must love him too, and trust in his redeeming blood, and try his works to do.” (“There Is a Green Hill Far Away,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 194.)

Truly, we must try to do his works with all that is in us. But then, having done all, we can trust in his redeeming blood to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

If we will enter into that glorious covenant Jesus offers us and give him all that we have, holding nothing back, trusting in his ability to make up for what we lack, he will exalt us. With him pulling with and for us, we can move forward in confidence toward our celestial home.

[illustration] *The Sermon on the Mount*, by Carl Heinrich Bloch; original at the Chapel of Frederiksborg Castle, Denmark. Used by permission of the Frederiksborgmuseum.

[illustration] Detail from *Behold My Hands and Feet*, by Harry Anderson

[photos] Photography by Jed Clark

[illustration] Detail from *Christ Healing a Blind Man*, by Del Parson

[illustration] Detail from *Christ Preaching in the Spirit World*, by Robert T. Barrett

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