

Episode 28

Mormon Identity ATONEMENT, PART 2

[Introduction, Music, and Narration (repeated)]

ROBERT MILLET: We welcome you to Mormon Identity, a period of time where we can come together and reflect on things that make Latter-day saints, Latter-day saints, particularly our beliefs, and our teachings. I've been discussing the doctrine of the Atonement with my friend and colleague Brent. I'm Robert Millet. Brent, a session ago we discussed the fall and the impact of the fall, and the relationship of the fall to the Atonement. We talked about the resurrection, we talked about a number of things, and we want to continue our discussion this session on the Atonement. Let's begin with 2 Nephi 25, maybe picking up with verse 22. Why don't you read for us, starting at verse 22, and we'll just stop every once and a while.

BRENT TOP: "Wherefore, these things shall go from generation to generation as long as the earth shall stand..." I think that these things that there's the Book of Mormon, the teachings of the brass plates, and the prophecies that are contained in there, "and they shall go according to the will and pleasure of God; and the nations who shall possess them shall be judged of them according to the words which are written. For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do."

ROBERT MILLET: We surely want to talk about this, 'after all we can do' but I first want to talk about this idea of we try to persuade our children also our brethren to believe in Christ and to be reconciled to God, what do you think of there, Brent, when you hear the word 'reconciled'?

BRENT TOP: Well, you know, I like to think of it in terms of human relationships and we speak of the spiritual death that comes by reason of the fall and our own sins as an estrangement

ROBERT MILLET: An alienation?

BRENT TOP: Yeah, and I asked my students, and I said, if a husband and wife are estranged, what does that mean? And you can say their relationship is on the rocks.

ROBERT MILLET: and they are not talking.

BRENT TOP: They're not talking, there is no intimacy, and so to me the opposite of estrangement is reconciled, so reconciled is more than just seeing eye to eye, it's bringing back a relationship to that intimate and full state, it's not just 'oh, ok, now we can agree to disagree, and can be civil'. It's much more than civility; it's a returning to a great relationship.

ROBERT MILLET: A right and proper relationship, you remember, some years ago when Elder Russell M. Nelson gave us that marvelous talk on the Atonement, and defined for us the Latin word from which reconciled comes, to literally, to sit down together with, to sit down again, to sit down again.

BRENT TOP: Well, think of; think of the great examples in the scriptures of relationship reconciliation, think of Jacob and Esau in the Old Testament, think of the Prodigal Son.

ROBERT MILLET: and his father.

BRENT TOP: I mean, how many times it says in the scriptures where they embrace each other and weep on their shoulders, and so reconciliation, I think that is a concept that is far deeper than just a patching up if you will.

ROBERT MILLET: You know what I think he is saying to us too Brent, we've taught our children diligently. We have tried to persuade our brethren to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God. I think part of that too is the need on my part to swallow my pride and to accept and abide by the will of God on things, rather than trying to do my own thing.

BRENT TOP: Well, isn't any form of reconciliation is gonna require...

ROBERT MILLET: Is eating a little humble pie.

BRENT TOP: Yeah.

ROBERT MILLET: Then this language, "For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do." Stephen Robinson, and I once were

invited to Kansas City to meet with some representatives of the Southern Baptist Convention. We met all day it seemed. It was about 7 hours. We were trying to help them better understand what we believe, and what our scriptures teach, and something came up about grace. One of them said, "Well, you Mormons don't believe in grace." And we said, "Well, that's not true, we do." We went back and forth, and finally one of them said, "Well we know, you believe in a kind of grace." Then he used a phrase I've never heard before. He said, "You believe in the Christ of the gaps, you believe that you do the 90% and Jesus, if he needs to, will make up the 10%." You know, I'm afraid that sometimes if we're not careful using some analogies may water down the power of the concept that Christ saves us, and that he does the pulling, he does the pushing, he gets us there.

BRENT TOP:

Well, you remember several years ago, Elder Dallin Oaks talked of this idea, on whether we are Christian and he acknowledged that there are times where we have maybe unwittingly left the wrong impression, and we have given our critics cause to believe that we are works oriented as opposed to faith oriented. I think this is a great example, in a radio studio here, we can't really demonstrate visually, so I'll try to do it with my voice intonation, we sometimes do the impression in our lives, "We are saved by grace, after ALL WE CAN DO."

ROBERT MILLET:

Yes, it's like the passage from Paul "In the strength of the Lord, I CAN DO ALL THINGS."

BRENT TOP:

Right, exactly.

ROBERT MILLET:

The fact of the matter is, it's this reliance, when I read those words they don't mean 'do everything you can do, and maybe Jesus will make up what's left,' but rather not withstanding that by grace we will be saved, not withstanding all we can do, in spite all we can do, above and all we can do, it's not going to be enough without the Lord's help.

ROBERT MILLET:

Brent we've been talking about 2 Nephi 25:23, a verse that I fear is sometimes misunderstood, I think there are people who suppose, for example, that grace consists of God's final 'boost' into celestial glory. Well, we're gonna need all the 'boost' we can get to be sure, but as you suggested in our last session, I think it was very

important, grace or the power of the Atonement represents more than that final ‘ummmphhh’ into salvation and exaltation, it is God’s help, assistance all along the way, every minute, of every day of every year.

BRENT TOP:

Well, that’s why I think that the Book of Mormon is so important in teaching us the Atonement as a comprehensive when it speaks of infinite and eternal, it is infinite and eternal in all the manifestations whereby the Atonement can help us. So, that phrase ‘after all we can do’, I like what you said with ‘Not withstanding all we can do’. There is a couple of passages in the Book of Mormon that I think help us to understand what that phrase ‘all we can do’ and all we can do really means. One is in Alma 24, and it’s the converted Lamanites, that take upon them the Anti-Nephi Lehites. I love the beautiful observation where their expressing their gratitude for the transforming power of the Atonement in their lives, where their blood-thirsty nature has been changed, and how they have been cleansed from their sins. We see that in verse 8, it says that through the Atonement that the spirit, it softens their hearts. They’re convinced of their sins and they turn to God, and their deep gratitude that the Atonement has taken away the guilt from our hearts, ‘through the merits of his son.’ They understood that it wasn’t just being nice to their neighbors that brought that about. Verse 11, I think is a very important passage, it says “And now behold, my brethren, since it has been all that we could do (as we were the most lost of all mankind) to repent of all our sins and the many murders which we have committed, and to get God to take them away from our hearts, for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain” I think that’s an interesting phrase again.

ROBERT MILLET:

Very similar to “after all we can do”.

BRENT TOP:

Then notice, I love this parenthetical statement, that, boy, ought to apply to all of us, as we were the most lost of all mankind, in our last session we talked about how the Book of Mormon over and over again speaks of all mankind as fallen and lost so that phrase applies to all of us, we were the most lost of all. To repent of all our sins and the many murders which we have committed, and to get God to take them away from our hearts, for it was all we could do.

ROBERT MILLET: There it is again.

BRENT TOP: To repent sufficiently before God, that he would take away our stain. The ‘all we could do’ is to trust in him and repent sufficiently, that I think is the best definition we have in the scriptures of what 2 Nephi 25:23 is telling us is that we do all we can do by having faith and repenting of our sins. Alma 34, we talked about that a little in the last session, but I really love directional part of this phrase, in verse 15 of Alma 34, Amulek is teaching the power and the profound and comprehensive nature of the Atonement and he says, “direct scripture”, There is that relying upon his merits and mercy, this being the intent of this last sacrifice to bring about the bowels of mercy which overpowered justice. Then, here is one of my favorite phrases in all of the scriptures, “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...” Then here is one of my favorite phrases in all the scriptures, “and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance.” Now I would have probably said just with my superficial understanding of the Atonement, that the Atonement bringeth about the means unto men that could receive a remission of their sins, but Amulek doesn’t say that, he says the Atonement bringeth about means that they, we, all mankind, might have faith unto repentance.

ROBERT MILLET: Emphasizing again faith is a gift of the spirit; it’s something that must be granted to us. In the same way that we could find in the New Testament and I suppose in the Book of Mormon too, repentance must be granted to us, and that’s made available through the Atonement.

BRENT TOP: Exactly we think that if we exercise faith and repent, then the Atonement will do this, when in reality we’re saying the Atonement is the very means that’s given me the power to do that faith, and repentance, and enduring to the end, and living according to the those principles.

ROBERT MILLET: Excellent, excellent. Let’s go back just a little bit, Brent, back to 2 Nephi 2, I wanted us to look at something, we’ve talked about Nephi’s teachings, I want to look at a couple of things more that Jacob said. In 2 Nephi Chapter 2, let’s catch up at about verse 6.

“Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth. Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law...” What do you think he means by that, to ‘answer the ends of the law’?

BRENT TOPP: The law of justice, the eternal law that every sin, every transgression of law requires a penalty or a payment in some sort.

ROBERT MILLET: So it's the savior confronts every wit, every bit of justice, he stands before it all, he faces it all, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, notice the qualifier, unto all those who have a broken heart, and a contrite spirit, and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered, meaning?

BRENT TOPP: Back to that law of justice, he is extending to us this conditional forgiveness, and being absolved from all of the claims of the law of justice, but if we will not avail ourselves of his Atonement, then justice can't rob mercy, and so the ends of the law must still be satisfied somehow.

ROBERT MILLET: President Ezra Taft Benson pointed out importantly that a broken heart, and a contrite spirit, is also a gift of the spirit. God gives us the right kind of heart to see ourselves for who we are. Humility really is an act of seeing me as I really am, and so only those who recognize their plight, only those who recognize their total and complete dependence on the Lord are the ones that can have the Atonement operated in their behalf. We'll be right back. Welcome back to Mormon Identity, I'm Bob Millet, and I'm joined by Brent Topp, of the department of Church history and doctrine at BYU, we're discussing and have been for the last two sessions the grand doctrine of the Atonement, as it is presented so masterfully by the Nephite prophets. I want to go back Brent, to 2 Nephi 2, where we were before, Jacob's teaching, isn't it interesting, Jacob must have learned well from his father Lehi, this doctrine because he teaches it so powerfully. Let's go to 2 Nephi 2:8, “Wherefore, how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that 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, who layeth down his life according to the flesh, and taketh it again by the power of the Spirit, that he may bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, being the first that should rise.” That language, you know Brent of 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. If we will let it, the scripture will turn us away from a focus on ourselves, it will focus us repeatedly on what he had done for us, this reminds me of that verse in section 45, the great mediation phrase, 'Listen to him who's your advocate with the father who is pleading your cause.' And then, so we wait for him to plead our cause and he does so in the most unusual way.

BRENT TOP: He doesn't say one word about us. He says, "father behold the sufferings of thy son, and basically he's saying, these people have believed on me, and he's not qualifying them, he's basically presenting himself before the father, and we make it onto his coat tails not on our own qualifications.

ROBERT MILLET: You know it highlights this important truth that the Atonement is built upon the love of God, but it's also built upon the righteousness of our God.

BRENT TOP: Well, remember King Benjamin says much the same thing in Mosiah Chapter 3, where he says, "I say unto you, that there shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent." That's pretty definitive of, King Benjamin isn't saying there is no other means except Christ, after all you can do.

ROBERT MILLET: That's right.

BRENT TOP: He's saying, absolutely definitively, He is the only means. He is the right way. He is the only merit that matters to our Father in Heaven.

ROBERT MILLET: You know Brent when I've taught this in bodies of saints; I'll occasionally have someone say, 'well are you saying that our works don't matter?' And I'll say, well of course not! Our works become important, our good works, and our service and our deeds of charity become important as a way of expressing love, and gratitude for the gift that's been given to us, as a way of manifesting that we really are converted to Christ, because when he says, "If ye love me, keep my commandments.", it's clear he wants us to be obedient disciples, but the question becomes 'what

am I focusing myself upon?', and the answer is, I'm focusing upon his perfect life, and his perfect Atonement.

BRENT TOP:

I find it fascinating and again I know with modern printing, it hasn't always been this way, but if you look in Mosiah Chapter 3, where we were in verse 17, the verse right next to it, the very end of verse 21, I mean its right next to it, you cannot look at verse 17, without also seeing verse 21.

ROBERT MILLET:

Read that for us.

BRENT TOP:

...and it says, that last phrase is talking about how we are saved and little children are the only ones that are blameless, but then that phrase, "And behold, when that time cometh, none shall be found blameless before God, except it be little children, only through repentance and faith on the name of the Lord God Omnipotent." It's clear that King Benjamin understands that yes, Christ is the only name, the only means whereby we can be saved, and the only means, or wherewith we can have faith in Christ, or accept of his Atonement is through faith and repentance.

ROBERT MILLET:

Yup, exactly. Let's move us a little bit now. Let's move to Alma 34 again, we were there a bit ago. Let's go back to 34, Amulek whose recently been reactivated or renewed whichever, let's pick up in Alma 34, the words of Amulek may be beginning in verse 9. We won't read all of this, but it just says an Atonement must be made or we would all be lost. Let's, Brent...

BRENT TOP:

Verse 16, is one that really, I think beautiful, that goes right along with what we said with....

ROBERT MILLET:

Why don't you read that, and we'll come back and go to 10, read 16.

BRENT TOP:

and it says, "And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them" I love this phrase. "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." That's pretty clear that the Atonement is made available to all of us, it is infinite and eternal, but we still have to be willing to take the arm of safety that is

extended to us, and that is through faith, and repentance, and obedience.

ROBERT MILLET:

We want to talk about verse 10, and about the nature of the infinite eternal sacrifice of our Savior a little more, we'll do that when we come back in just a moment. Welcome back to Mormon Identity, I'm Bob Millet, and I'm joined by Brent Topp, we've been discussing Brent, the magnificent teachings of the Book of Mormon on the Atonement of Christ. We're on Alma chapter 34, where Amulek is teaching so powerfully. Let's go to verse 10, "For it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice; yea, not a sacrifice of man, neither of beast, neither of any manner of fowl; for it shall not be a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice." (Meaning I assume a mortal sacrifice), but it must be... Then I think this is really interesting verses 11, and 11 and 12. "Now there is not any man that can sacrifice his own blood which will atone for the sins of another. Now, if a man murdereth, behold will our law, which is just, take the life of his brother? I say unto you, Nay. But the law requireth the life of him who hath murdered; therefore there can be nothing which is short of an infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world." That may not really be as clear to some of us, but it strikes me Brent that these two verses 11 and 12 in particular, are getting at something most unusual about the Atonement, in a sense the Atonement is infinite and eternal because it defies law and logic almost in terms of our way of seeing things in this world, in this world, you do wrong, you get punished, I do wrong, I get punished, it just isn't the case, my son does something really silly and stupid, and I say to the judge, 'It's okay I'll go to prison for him.' We don't operate like that, but this is a system that is so unusual that it's called infinite and eternal, because a man steps onto the scene and says, "I know I didn't do it, but I love this person and I'm gonna suffer in his behalf."

BRENT TOPP:

You know also can texturally from what Amulek is saying there, with also the regards to the Law of Moses, and I think he's also when he uses the term, "fowl" and "beast", I think he's reminding them, "Hey the sacrifices that you are offering are merely reminders or symbols, they don't bring remission of sins."

ROBERT MILLET:

That's right.

BRENT TOP: So, if you were to offer your own life, you're still mortal, that doesn't do it.

ROBERT MILLET: Yup.

BRENT TOP: Any more than the Law of Moses by itself can bring about that infinite and eternal sacrifice.

ROBERT MILLET: Verse 13, "Therefore, it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice, and then shall there be, or it is expedient there should be, a stop to the shedding of blood; then shall the law of Moses be fulfilled; yea, it shall be all fulfilled, every jot and tittle, and none shall have passed away." Here is another insight on how it's an infinite and eternal sacrifice. "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." It is infinite and eternal in nature, because the son of God, is infinite and eternal, and could not have done what he did if he were not.

BRENT TOP: I think that if we were to give the cliff notes version of that. Very simply, Amulek is saying, the Atonement can only do what an infinite and eternal atonement is supposed to do when it requires, and involves the sacrifice of a God; the sacrifice of a God who is infinite and eternal, great and last, alpha and omega, beginning and the end, encompasses all things. That's the infinite and eternal sacrifice; it can only be accomplished by God.

ROBERT MILLET: In fact, that's so beautifully said Brent, it's a way of getting across this idea, we can think of Jesus, in premortal life, our elder brother, we can think of Jesus as our friend, and we can talk about all those things that make him seem close to us, but the fact of the matter is, Christ is God, and if he weren't God, he couldn't save us.

BRENT TOP: Well, that infinite and eternal concept is also brought up again in D&C 19, which is one of the most beautiful modern passages on the Atonement, but he then says, "Which suffering cause, I God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of the pain." I think the infinite and eternal is a way of saying, 'this is God doing this for us.'

ROBERT MILLET: Well, we've talked about infinite and eternal as words to describe the great Atonement. Maybe Brent, why don't you lead us in a

discussion that the infinite eternal one, Jesus, taught about the Atonement himself.

BRENT TOP: Well, we can't talk about the Atonement in the Book of Mormon without letting the infinite and eternal resurrected Christ tell us about the Atonement, because he reminds us that he is Alpha and Omega. In 3 Nephi, we see the Lord speaking of himself, and of His gospel, in verse 13, in Chapter 27, he says, "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, because my Father sent me." Then the whole rest of the chapter is he's telling us how we can avail ourselves of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

ROBERT MILLET: How does he do that?

BRENT TOP: Look in verse 17, 18, 19; he gives us the principles and ordinances of the Atonement or the gospel.

ROBERT MILLET: Why don't you read 19, and 20, which is a good summing up?

BRENT TOP: "No unclean thing can enter into his kingdom; therefore nothing entereth into his rest..." meaning eternal life or God's life, "save it be those who have washed their garments in my blood, because of their faith, and the repentance of all their sins, and their faithfulness unto the end."

ROBERT MILLET: There's that enduring.

BRENT TOP: I love that, and then the Savior again reminds us 'Repent be baptized that ye may be sanctified with the reception of the Holy Ghost.' Then verse 21 sums it all up, of the Atonement, of how we avail ourselves of the Atonement, and he says, "ye know the things that ye must do in my church; for the works which ye have seen me do that shall ye also do; for that which ye have seen me do even that shall ye do;" So, what we're saying here is Christ has made it possible for us to become like him, if we will exercise faith, repent, be faithful, live by the spirit, we will become more like him, because of his atoning power in our lives.

ROBERT MILLET: Well said. In April of 1977, Elder Boyd K Packer, delivered his marvelous address entitled, 'The Mediator', after he had read words from scripture, particularly Paul writing to Timothy about Christ being his mediator, Elder Packer said in essence, this truth is the very root of Christian doctrine. He said, "You may know a

great deal about the gospel as you branch out from there, but if those branches are not tied to that root truth of the Atonement, if somehow been cut free, there will be no life nor substance nor redemption in them.” I think brothers and sisters that says something to us about the Atonement as the central doctrine, the Atonement breeds life and light, and understanding into all other doctrines, and because of the Atonement, everything makes sense.

You’ve been listening to Mormon Identity, thanks for tuning in. We hope you join us next time.