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*Vast and Intimate:
The Atonement in the
Heavens and in the Heart*

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Vast and Intimate: The Atonement in the Heavens and in the Heart

L ROBERT WEBB

Last spring when I received the assignment to give this talk, I was speaking with a colleague. “I have to give a BYU devotional talk next fall. That will probably ruin my summer,” I explained in reference to having the task of preparation hanging over my head.

Not losing a beat, he quipped wryly in return, “It will probably ruin our fall!”

You see that I have some good friends—many of whom are here today. I am grateful for that.

As I speak today, I will heed the advice of my sophomore son, who said, “Dad, what the students want you to do is tell stories.” While I was preparing this talk he peered at my computer screen and cautioned, “Quite a few big words there, Dad.” I will try not to ruin your fall, and I will try to tell some stories and experiences that I hope will be faith promoting.

As you have noticed, the title for my address is “Vast and Intimate: The Atonement in the Heavens and in the Heart.” I hope that does not seem presumptuous. I do not consider myself an authority on the doctrine or a spokesman for the Church. I have prepared and discarded several talks on other subjects before returning to this one. In my consternation over what to say, I asked this same son, who is a BYU student, to give me a blessing.

That tender, shared experience with the Spirit led me back to the topic of the Atonement, which is a topic that has deep, personal meaning for me. I have felt its blessings in my own life and have observed them in the lives of others.

As I speak about the Atonement of Jesus Christ this morning, I will give a scriptural foundation for what I wish to say. Then I will share some personal experiences that have made these verses of scripture vivid and instructive for me. Finally, I will reflect on the majesty and magnitude of the Atonement. I hope that my deep conviction of the divinity of the Savior and my gratitude for his redemption runs through the whole of the presentation.

I take as a scriptural theme three verses from 3 Nephi 27 in the Book of Mormon. These verses are part of the Savior’s own words to the Nephite disciples following his resurrection and appearance at the temple in Bountiful to about 2,500 faithful people who saw for themselves that this was the God of Israel and that

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his body bore the marks of the Crucifixion. In this great sermon Christ named his church and described his mission, his gospel, and the central place of atonement in the gospel plan. Verses 13–15 read:

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.

And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil —

And for this cause have I been lifted up; therefore, according to the power of the Father I will draw all men unto me, that they may be judged according to their works. [3 Nephi 27:13-15; emphasis added]

Please keep this passage in mind as I now share a personal experience as a kind of metaphor for understanding our utter dependence upon the Savior in our trials and separations and for understanding his willingness to reach out and draw us to him through the power of the Atonement.

Some years ago, when I was much more fit and foolhardy, some friends and I decided to climb Gannett Peak, the highest mountain in Wyoming. Surrounded by the Wind River Range, this gorgeous, towering granite pinnacle rises nearly 14,000 feet, emerging at its summit from a permanent glacier that must be crossed to reach the mountaintop. After a long backpack trip along the trail, we camped and spent the night. Early the next morning we hiked the rest of the trail to the foot of the mountain, where we would begin our mountain assault, equipped with gaiters, crampons, ice axes, special climbing ropes, and carabiners—those oblong metal rings connected to a

safety rope that snap to one's harness. Although we were merely novices, we were determined to get to the top. After a little practice with our equipment and some vigorous climbing, we found ourselves on the steep and treacherous slope of the glacier that guards the mountain summit.

For safety's sake we roped ourselves together in two-man teams to cross the glacier. The lead person in the team cautiously moved forward with the protection of the line tying him to the person situated behind him on a secure surface. I was roped to my wife's brother, Miller Gardner, whose nickname is Mo and who is 6'4" and weighs 230 pounds. He moved just ahead of me across the treacherous glacier. Gradually I fed out the rope that would conceivably stop any fall. When we reached a snow bridge that spanned a deep crevasse, to maximize the protection I sank the ice axe to its hilt into the glacier, looped the rope around the upper handle of the axe, and fed out the line a little at a time as Mo moved across the cornice.

Suddenly, without any warning, the snowy cornice gave way, dropping him through the surface and leaving him dangling from my safety rope beneath the collapsed snow bridge. Holding firmly on to the rope to stop it from playing out any further, I could see at once the terrified look on his face and the great abyss that extended hundreds of feet below him. I struggled to retrieve him from this dangerous and precarious position. Only my hold on the other end of the line kept him from plummeting to a certain death on the hard surface far below.

Finally, after what seemed like an interminable length of time, another member of our party reached our position and helped lift Mo back to safety. Afterward we sat together silently, exhausted, and soberly pondered what might have happened had we not roped up, had the rope not held, or had we not been able to draw Mo back to a place of safety. Life

seemed extraordinarily precious to us after that moment of grave and threatening danger.

Now let me connect the scripture I read from 3 Nephi to the story and make a few observations. We read in the Bible and the Book of Mormon of a deep pit into which the wicked fall because of transgression. The weight of personal sins pulls the offender down over a precipice toward certain destruction unless that fall is broken by something or someone. That “someone” is the Lord Jesus Christ, who holds the safety line above us. The “something,” I suggest, is the safety line of his gospel that ties us to him and stops our fall.

What makes the line hold each of us are the “carabiners” of principles and ordinances. (Remember those unbreakable metal connector rings?) They fasten the line securely to us. These connectors are faith, repentance, baptism, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and endurance. Each of them secures the safety line from the Savior above to us below. We are suspended on that line. It arrests our fall into a disastrous spiritual chasm. If we hold on firmly, the line to him protects us from falling hopelessly into the deep abyss of death and disease, sin and sorrow, discouragement and doubt, failure and fear, and loss and loneliness. Mosiah assures us that “thus doth the Lord work with his power in all cases among the children of men, extending the arm of mercy towards them that put their trust in him” (Mosiah 29:20).

It would have done me no good to try to stop the plunge of my brother-in-law had I not stood immovably and securely on a firm place. His fall simply would have claimed both of us if my footing had given way. Likewise the Savior stands steadfastly on the high ground of purity and righteousness and is armed with the full power of the Father in order to draw all of his children unto him. Jesus is perfectly positioned to break our fall by the atoning force of his divine strength, his goodness, his ordination, and his loving concern for us. No one else

can hold on to us. He alone can stop our fall and bring us back to his presence.

Not only that, but there had to be a prior arrangement, a plan, for Christ to be there for us to catch us precisely at the moment when the fall would have dashed us against the rocks below. As he said, “I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me” (3 Nephi 27:13).

Now I realize that my climbing analogy has limitations and even breaks down at some point. What is different about my puny hold on my brother-in-law and the Savior’s mighty hold on us is that *all* of us are tethered to his line en masse: he bears the weight of the whole human family at once on that cord of caring. And we are *heavy* with our burdensome accumulation of sins and afflictions. The gravity of the law of justice and our own grief pull us downward. The grace of his mercy draws all men and women unto him. We are “lifted up” by his holy arm to the Father as our safety line holds firm because of our obedience to his saving principles and ordinances of the gospel. He will not loosen the knot. Only we can do that by our indifference to his ways.

He won’t always prevent the pains and afflictions, but he has given us these assurances:

“I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions” (Mosiah 24:14).

“They should suffer no manner of afflictions, save it were swallowed up in the joy of Christ” (Alma 31:38).

“Whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions, and shall be lifted up at the last day” (Alma 36:3).

All of this is done through the power of his atoning sacrifice.

In my association with some young friends I am reminded of how we are supported by the Savior’s atonement in trials and tribulation. I first met them about 1992 in a BYU married student stake where I served. I came to know

them well and to learn much from their example. I speak of David and Sharilyn Evans and their children. Their experience gives tangible evidence of how the Savior reaches us in our adversities. I realize that their story of faith and courage and devotion is representative of others in our community who have also suffered—some of whom are gathered in this audience today. I recount the Evanses' story here with their permission.

I saw the Evans family again at the 1994 BYU Homecoming Spectacular here in the Marriott Center. As my wife and I were about to take our seats near the concourse, I heard my name called. Turning around, I saw these friends and their children: one child in a wheelchair pushed along by his mother and the other supported in his father's arms. Despite the infirmities they faced, these parents were happy and buoyant. They were enjoying the evening with their children.

As fine as the Homecoming performance was, I could not get the Evans family off my mind. Their cheerful faith and buoyant courage eclipsed even the brilliance on the stage before me. I simply could not stop thinking about and shedding tears over the little family behind me.

The young father—about the age of some of you here—had served with distinction on our student stake high council. More than once I had met both husband and wife in temple recommend interviews. There I learned that both of their children—then a beautiful four-year-old girl and a handsome two-year-old boy—have an incurable disease called spinal muscular atrophy that will progressively rob their muscles of strength and function.

It is a gloomy prognosis for these children and an incredible burden for their parents. One day the breath of life will ebb out of the children as muscles no longer respond to the brain signals to operate the heart and the lungs. There is little that medical science can do to stop this degeneration.

In the meantime, neither child can sit upright unaided by a bracing chair or supporting parent. Neither can walk. Neither can eat without food being lifted to their lips by a patient parent. Neither can turn over in bed without the benefit of a parent's kindly hand.

How can their parents remain so cheerful in the face of these burdens? How can they be so full of faith in Heavenly Father and his plan of happiness? How is it that this mother and father have grown ever better, not bitter, as they have faced two of life's cruel and unjust genetic mistakes? The answer lies in the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Sharilyn recently said to me, "I cannot begin to express the comfort and peace that have come to us through the Atonement of Jesus Christ."

They have not borne their burdens alone. The Lord has been there with them in their adversity and has reached them in their trials to fill them with hope, to lighten their load, and to soothe their aching hearts. As they have braced and supported their children, so has the Savior braced and supported them. The Savior has shown them a brighter day when their young will run and laugh and play. He has extended to them his personal promise that "he will swallow up death in victory; and . . . will wipe away tears from off all faces." And they will say, "We have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isaiah 25:8-9).

The scriptures help us understand how the Redeemer's power can reach us in our suffering, our sin, and our sorrow. The Book of Mormon prophesies that the Lord "will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:12). Twice in this single verse Alma emphasizes that the Lord needed to suffer the infirmities of his people *in the flesh* in order to have mercy and compassion for them.

Whatever anguish his people would experience individually, he would bear collectively for all of them.

Both Isaiah and Abinadi prophesied that Christ would be “acquainted with grief”—our grief (Isaiah 53:3, Mosiah 14:3). According to the Latin cognate, *to be acquainted* means “to know personally, to know perfectly, to know firsthand.” It was one thing for the Savior empathetically to *understand* our sins and sorrows; it was quite another actually to *experience* them, to take upon himself the guilt and pain, the homesickness and loneliness, the failure and disappointment, the hurt and anguish of every one of us as he did, causing him “to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit” (D&C 19:18).

It was not enough for him to know about our infirmities; he had to experience them personally in order that he could reach us in every extremity. There is no place so remote, no condition so dark and despairing, no feeling so helpless, no hurt so deep that the Savior has not already been there and borne those burdens for us. Only in this way could he then *succor* us—which, as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has pointed out, literally means “to run to” (“Come unto Me,” *Ensign*, April 1998, p. 22). It is comforting to me to think that when I am in most desperate need of help from the Savior, not only will he be there to help, but he will “run to me” to do so. What compassion! What humility! What overwhelming love and support for every one of us!

It is staggering for me to consider that not only does the Atonement have this poignant personal dimension for each of us, but it also has a planetary dimension for our world and probably for others as well. Thus it may be both interpersonal and interplanetary. Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote of the Atonement: “Its effects cover all men, the earth itself and all forms of life thereon, and reach[es] out into the endless expanses of eternity” (*MD*, p. 64).

Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote:

Since Jesus is the creator of other worlds whose inhabitants are also “begotten sons and daughters unto God” (D&C 76:24), it may be that the benefits of the Atonement will extend to all of the spirit children of our Father in Heaven, wherever situated. [“Not My Will, But Thine” (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), p. 51]

The Atonement is intensely individual, reaching to every single soul, and it is universal, reaching to all creation. In both of these aspects, planetary and personal, the Atonement overcomes separation of every kind.

Recently I have read again some material by Professor Hugh Nibley about the need for and effects of the Atonement on the decaying world in which we live (see *Approaching Zion*, vol. 9 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company; Provo: FARMS, 1989], chapter 18; and *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 2* [Provo: FARMS, 1993], 2:275–85). Brother Nibley uses a term from science to describe this decay. That term, *entropy*, comes from a Greek word that means “turning in” or, for our purposes here, “caving in.” The dictionary defines it as the general trend of the universe toward death and disorder. *Entropy* is a word used to describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which observes that everything runs down, comes apart, or separates, and consequently even the earth itself must be put back together by the atoning power of Christ. It is to reverse this decay, as the tenth article of faith teaches, that “the earth will be *renewed* and receive its paradisiacal glory” (Articles of Faith 1:10; emphasis added).

Not only does the Atonement hold the power to overcome cosmic separation, but it also provides the way to resolve personal separations—separations from Heavenly Father, from one another, and from personal well being. Through his atonement Jesus

experienced every separation that we might suffer: separation from peace of mind, separation from health, separation from our good name and reputation by being falsely accused, separation from another by being wronged or committing a wrong, separation through divorce and loneliness, and separation from joy and happiness. All of these losses were borne by him ahead of time in order that he could reach out to us under every adverse circumstance.

Nephi wrote, “He doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life *that he may draw all men unto him*” (2 Nephi 26:24; emphasis added).

Suffering and separation will inevitably come, but restoration by the Redeemer will prevail. There will be no permanent losses. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught: “All your losses will be made up to you in the resurrection, provided you continue faithful. By the vision of the Almighty I have seen it” (*Teachings*, p. 296).

To summarize this part of my remarks, as we think about the problems of separation and decay, we see that the Atonement had to be *infinite* in order to reach with unifying power to all the places, the people, and the problems of creation. But so did it have to be *intimate* to extend healing power to the individual lives of injured souls. Thus the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, came with both all-encompassing power and with caring and compassionate tenderness. President Gordon B. Hinckley captured this sweeping sense of scope and scale when he wrote these words about the Atonement from which the title to my remarks is taken:

I sense in a measure the meaning of His atonement. I cannot comprehend it all. It is so vast in its reach and yet so intimate in its effect that it defies comprehension. When all is said and done, when all of history is examined, when the deepest depths of the human mind have been explored, there is noth-

ing so wonderful, so majestic, so tremendous as this act of grace. [TGBH, p. 28]

It is humbling and awe-inspiring for me to realize how the Savior’s atonement reverses the degradation of the natural world and reconciles his children to him and to one another.

I am reminded of an experience I had several years ago while serving as bishop. I learned from my counselors at one point that an elderly sister had declined a calling in the ward. Sensing that something was amiss with this stalwart and faithful woman, I made an appointment to go to her home to speak with her. When I got there, she and her husband were both present.

After a little polite conversation I said that I understood that she had not felt comfortable in accepting a ward calling and asked what I could do to help. Both of them stared at the floor a long, long time before she answered. At last she spoke to explain that 50 years earlier, before they had been married, they had been intimate with one another and had been too ashamed to clear this up with the bishop before being married in the temple. For all of these years they had lived under the guilty burden of this transgression while paying generous tithes and offerings, serving faithfully in responsible Church callings, rearing a family in the faith, and sending children on missions.

Though they were faithful, they were not whole. They were kept from the peace and contentment that should have been theirs in golden years by clouds of self-doubt and the tarnished memory of unresolved transgression. Outwardly they seemed secure and serene. Inwardly they were carrying a kind of damage and hurt that intruded on their spiritual confidence. Together they had suffered this awful alienation from the Lord for a long time.

I don’t know *why* their ordeal lasted a lifetime. I only know *when* it ended as the Lord lifted them from their lonely lamentations. As I tearfully listened to their story, I prayed

earnestly to know what I might do to relieve them. When they finished speaking I felt impressed to say simply: "It is over. You have suffered long enough. I am sure the Lord has forgiven you. Repentance consists of forsaking a sin and confessing. You forsook that guilty act long, long ago. Tonight you also confessed. Now you are free. I feel certain that the Lord has forgotten your transgression and is eager to dispel your guilt with redeeming grace."

After kneeling in prayer together we three stood encircled in one another's arms as they sobbed out the last of their pent-up suffering and anguish.

"Oh, Bishop, is it really over?" they asked.

I assured them that it was.

The loving kindness and the grace of the Savior poured into their lives in sweet forgiving. He reached past the things that separated them from him and embraced them in sweet communion.

In one of our most beautiful Church hymns, Emma Lou Thayne depicts the answering of our innermost longing for peace and consolation that only can come from the Prince of Peace. She wrote:

*Where can I turn for peace? Where is my solace
When other sources cease to make me whole?
When with a wounded heart, anger, or malice,
I draw myself apart, Searching my soul?*

*Where, when my aching grows, Where, when I
languish,
Where, in my need to know, where can I run?
Where is the quiet hand to calm my anguish?
Who, who can understand? He, only One.*

*He answers privately, Reaches my reaching
In my Gethsemane, Savior and Friend.
Gentle the peace he finds for my beseeching.*

*Constant he is and kind, Love without end.
["Where Can I Turn for Peace?" Hymns, 1985,
no. 129]*

We are now in the season of celebration and gratitude. Thanksgiving is soon upon us and Christmas is not far behind. As we take stock of our gifts and blessings during the coming weeks, I hope we will think more carefully about the gift of God's Son and his redeeming sacrifice. What protective promise filled the little straw-covered grotto as the Lord of Lords and King of Kings was born in Judea to fulfill the hopes and dreams of all mankind! With him were born that night in Bethlehem hope and healing, light and life. By his coming a world darkened by sin and sorrow was brightened by his generous gifts of godliness.

I have often thought of the marvelous ironies of his coming. Although he came as a newborn babe, he had already existed from everlasting to everlasting. Though tiny Bethlehem was his birthplace, he had created the vast universe with all the planets and all creation. Born as a subject of King Herod, he had majestically ruled the heavens and the earth long before any earthly king took throne. Honored with gifts of the wise men, all the treasures of the earth had come into being as his handiwork. Shepherds worshiped in Judea the one soon to become the Good Shepherd. And, finally, helpless and small in Mary's arms, he would eventually rescue his Father's children with his mighty arm outstretched to save us all.

I bear witness of the Savior's atoning greatness and goodness and testify that he is the Son of God, our Redeemer. I bear witness that President Gordon B. Hinckley is his servant, our prophet. I do this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.