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Alma 14: The Origins of Good and Evil

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Alma 14: The Origins of Good and Evil

1 And it came to pass after he had made an end of speaking unto the people many of them did believe on his words, and began to repent, and to search the scriptures.

2 But the more part of them were desirous that they might destroy Alma and Amulek; for they were angry with Alma, because of the plainness of his words unto Zeezrom; and they also said that Amulek had lied unto them, and had reviled against their law and also against their lawyers and judges.

3 And they were also angry with Alma and Amulek; and because they had testified so plainly against their wickedness, they sought to put them away privily.

4 But it came to pass that they did not; but they took them and bound them with strong cords, and took them before the chief judge of the land.

5 And the people went forth and witnessed against them—testifying that they had reviled against the law, and their lawyers and judges of the land, and also of all the people that were in the land; and also testified that there was but one God, and that he should send his Son among the people, but he should not save them; and many such things did the people testify against Alma and Amulek. Now this was done before the chief judge of the land. ...

8 And they brought their wives and children together, and whosoever believed or had been taught to believe in the word of God they caused that they should be cast into the fire; and they also brought forth their records which contained the holy scriptures, and cast them into the fire also, that they might be burned and destroyed by fire.

9 And it came to pass that they took Alma and Amulek, and carried them forth to the place of martyrdom, that they might witness the destruction of those who were consumed by fire. ...

14 Now it came to pass that when the bodies of those who had been cast into the fire were consumed, and also the records which were cast in with them, the chief judge of the land came and stood before Alma and Amulek, as they were bound; and he smote them with his hand upon their cheeks, and said unto them: After what ye have seen, will ye preach again unto this people, that they shall be cast into a lake of fire and brimstone?

15 Behold, ye see that ye had not power to save those who had been cast into the fire; neither has God saved them because they were of thy faith. And the judge smote them again upon their cheeks, and asked: What say ye for yourselves?

16 Now this judge was after the order and faith of Nehor, who slew Gideon (Alma

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14:1-5, 8-9, 14-16).

There is an instructive pattern in Mormon's writings that helps us understand his intent. That is, he frequently gives us a sermon by one of the Nephite prophets, then follows that by telling a story that expands upon, or illustrates, his point. Alma 14 is an example of that pattern. In this chapter he gives us a vivid conclusion to what Alma has been teaching.

Throughout chapters 12 and 13, Alma taught, in ever expanding examples, the contrast between good and evil. Chapter 12 focuses on the invitation we must accept in order to come into the presence of God, contrasted with the consequences of our refusing to accept that invitation. Chapter 13 begins at the Council in Heaven and shows the responsibilities of its members to help others. He contrasts the noble and great ones with those who were not in the Council, and shows that the differences were entirely of their own making:

4 And thus they have been called to this holy calling on account of their faith, while others would reject the Spirit of God on account of the hardness of their hearts and blindness of their minds, while, if it had not been for this they might have had as great privilege as their brethren.

5 Or in fine, in the first place they were on the same standing with their brethren; thus this holy calling being prepared from the foundation of the world for such as would not harden their hearts, being in and through the Atonement of the Only Begotten Son, who was prepared— (Alma 13:4-5).

Alma then calls our attention to the earthly attributes of those who had the priesthood at the Council. He does this by discussing the reign and accomplishments of Melchizedek, who was both king and high priest. However, Alma does not contrast that with those in this world who reject the principles of salvation and seek to become a law unto themselves (that is, they reject the law that is the Savior's gospel and seek to find some sort of supremacy some other way).

It is Mormon who presents the contrasting example by showing the arguments and methods used by the apostates to subdue and discredit the prophets. Their actions demonstrate what the Savior explained to Nicodemus, "For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved" (John 3:20). Mormon gives us a vivid example of those who do not want their deeds exposed to

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the light. He tells us, "They were also angry with Alma and Amulek; and because they had testified so plainly against their wickedness" (Alma 14:5).

Their accusations against the prophets were consistent with their sidestepping the matter of their own apostasy. Those who had been challenged misrepresented the prophets' words, "testifying that they had reviled against the law, and their lawyers and judges of the land, and also of all the people that were in the land; and also testified that there was but one God, and that he should send his Son among the people, but he should not save them."

Then they did the most heinous thing of all. They sought to prove Alma and Amulek were not true prophets by showing they did not have power to protect other people, or themselves. To do that, they drove the believing men from their homes and property, and "brought their wives and children together, and whosoever believed or had been taught to believe in the word of God they caused that they should be cast into the fire; and they also brought forth their records which contained the holy scriptures, and cast them into the fire also."

Finally they turned on the prophets themselves. The chief judge "smote them with his hand upon their cheeks, and said unto them: After what ye have seen, will ye preach again unto this people, that they shall be cast into a lake of fire and brimstone?"

By telling this story, Mormon had drawn a sharp contrast between the righteousness of Melchizedek and the evil of Alma's adversaries, showing their evil to be functionally extreme, but conceptually typical. This is the classic conflict between good and evil that was represented in so many ways during the full eternal sweep of the Feast of Tabernacles Temple drama.

In chapters 12-14, Alma and Mormon also introduced us to the answers to some of human philosophy's most perplexing questions: what is the origin of evil? and Why does God permit it?

Alma's profound assurance in chapter 13 is one key to those answers: "in the first place they were on the same standing with their brethren" (Alma 13:5). The other key is in B. H. Roberts's discussion about the most fundamental characteristics of an intelligence. He wrote:

He is called an "intelligence;" and this I believe is descriptive of him. That is, intelligence is the entity's chief characteristic. If this be a true deduction, then the entity must be self-conscious, and "others-conscious," that is, lhe must have the power to distinguish himself from other things-the "me" from the "not me." He must

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have the power of deliberation, by which he sets over one thing against another; with power also to form a judgment that this or that is a better thing or state than this or that. Also there goes with this idea of intelligence a power of choosing one thing instead of another, one state rather than another.⁸²⁰

Their key ideas are these: at the beginning of our cognizance we were all on an equal standing and could tell the difference between “me” and “not me.” That basic knowledge imposed on us our first and most eternal dilemma: “What is in *my* best interest and how do *I* secure that objective?”

One possible answer was “It is my best interest to make ‘not me’ subservient to ‘me’ and thereby subvert his desires to my profit and aggrandizement. I can use *another* for *my* purposes, to gratify my desires, to bring about my own glorification.” If that was the premise on which an individual built his existence, then he has incorporated into himself the seeds of the most fundamental evil.

On the other hand, one could aspire to this purpose: “As light, truth, love, and life fuse to produce joy in me, so do they produce joy in others—and the most efficient way of obtaining that joy is to lift others and to be lifted by them, therefore, I will expend my energies to lift others.” If that is the answer by which one seeks to define one’s Self, then he has discovered the way by which he may achieve the ultimate good—which is also the way to achieve ultimate personal joy.

Those examples are the two extreme ends of the spectrum, the profoundly evil and the supremely good. At one end is the telestial glory with its multiple degrees of fading light and increased darkness. At the other is celestial glory, with its three degrees of goodness and purity. Somewhere in between are the “honorable” people of the world—the terrestrial who are neither full of contempt nor full of love, but are suspended in a kind of disregard—perhaps indifference to others—an unconcern that neither descends into hurtfulness nor rises to the law of consecration.

Because the powers of the Atonement enable us to repent and turn from what we seem to be just now, to what we strive to be, we have the agency to reject mistaken attitudes and actions, and to ultimately become precisely what we choose to become.

⁸²⁰ Roberts, *Seventy’s Course in Theology*, 2:8-9. The following note appears on the title page: “Elder Roberts submitted the following paper to the First Presidency and a number of the Twelve Apostles, none of whom found anything objectionable in It, or contrary to the revealed word of God, and therefore favor its publication.-Editors.” Elder Roberts full quote is found in the chapter about Alma 13, 806-9.

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Therefore, in the end, each of us will become the eternal product of our own making. Examples of the differences are all around us, and are clearly given in the scriptures. Satan epitomized the one extreme when he said “surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor. give me thy glory” (see Moses 4:1-3). Cain brought it to the practicalities of this world:

32 And Cain went into the field, and Cain talked with Abel, his brother. And it came to pass that while they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel, his brother, and slew him.

33 And Cain gloried in that which he had done, saying: I am free; surely the flocks of my brother falleth into my hands (Moses 5:32-33).

In contrast, the Savior epitomized the other end of the spectrum when he said, “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” (3 Nephi 27:13).

Shortly before his death, Peter explained that principle in simple terms, illustrating how one makes his calling and election sure:

5 And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge;

6 And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness

7 And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity (2 Peter 1:5-7).

Not long before his death, Mormon taught the same principle to his friends: “Wherefore, cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all” (Moroni 7:46). And the Savior explained:

37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

38 This is the first and great commandment.

39 And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself (Matthew 22:37-39).

For those who keep their covenants, charity is the summation of all that they are. For

those same people, living the law of consecration is the summation of all that they do.

Alma and Lehi Explain Justice and Mercy to Their Sons

There was apparently a strong and not very subtle subtext that ran through the ancient temple drama. It was elaborated on by both Lehi and Alma when they were speaking with their sons. The notion that it was a subtext of the drama comes from the fact that both prophets presented the ideas by using events of the drama to illustrate and reinforce the points they were trying to make. (Or, perhaps it was not a subtext at all. Perhaps the psalms that taught it so clearly have been lost from our canon.)

It is apparent from the words of Lehi and Alma that the message of the festival temple drama was broader and deeper than one might realize even from a detailed study of the psalms we have. Alma used the drama as the basis of his sermon in Alma 5, then used it differently in his address to his “beloved brethren” in Alma 7. He called on the power of its teachings during his confrontation with Zeezrom, and then used it again when he tried to explain the relationship of justice and mercy to his son Corianton. At the beginning of his conversation with Corianton, he had said:

3 And it is requisite with the justice of God that men should be judged according to their works; and if their works were good in this life, and the desires of their hearts were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good.

4 And if their works are evil they shall be restored unto them for evil (Alma 41:3-4a).

Corianton was unable to see why God would exclude anyone from the pleasures of heaven, so his father turned to the principles presented in the drama to help his son understand. Alma said to him:

2 Now behold, my son, I will explain this thing unto thee. For behold, after the Lord God sent our first parents forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground, from whence they were taken—yea, he drew out the man, and he placed at the

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east end of the garden of Eden, cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the tree of life—

3 Now, we see that the man had become as God, knowing good and evil;⁸²¹ and lest he should put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat and live forever, the Lord God placed cherubim and the flaming sword, that he should not partake of the fruit—

4 And thus we see that there was a time granted unto man to repent, yea, a probationary time, a time to repent and serve God.

5 For behold, if Adam had put forth his hand immediately, and partaken of the tree of life, he would have lived forever, according to the word of God, having no space for repentance; yea, and also the word of God would have been void, and the great plan of salvation would have been frustrated (Alma 42:2-5).

Lehi had taught his children the same principle. He said:

19 And after Adam and Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit they were driven out of the garden of Eden, to till the earth.

20 And they have brought forth children; yea, even the family of all the earth.

21 And the days of the children of men were prolonged, according to the will of God, that they might repent while in the flesh; wherefore, their state became a state of probation, and their time was lengthened, according to the commandments which the Lord God gave unto the children of men. For he gave commandment that all men must repent; for he showed unto all men that they were lost, because of the transgression of their parents (2 Nephi 2:19-21).

Near the conclusion of Alma's words to Corianton, he summed up all he had said with this observation:

26 And thus God bringeth about his great and eternal purposes, which were prepared from the foundation of the world (Alma 42:26).

⁸²¹ This is an interesting and probably very careful choice of words. As pointed out earlier the object of this life is to learn by experience good *from* evil. However at this point in the story Adam and Eve are still in the Garden and have had no such experience, therefore they only know good *and* evil. If they were to remain in the Garden in that state, then their paradise would become a hell.

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Those words also sum up the whole message of the festival temple drama. It was about the realization—the fulfillment—of the plan that had been established from before the foundation of the world.

The entire story of the cosmic creation as told in the festival temple drama covered the full sweep of human existence from the time we began as cognizant beings until our future glorious new beginning when we will receive fully functional resurrected bodies. The story of that creation sequence is primarily an account of the workings of the Savior's Atonement—of his bringing chaos into cosmos.

The great plan of redemption that was implemented by the Savior was designed to answer the needs of both the intelligences and of their spiritual and physical bodies—it would bring them into perfection together, thus bringing universal cosmos out of universal chaos.

Both had to be accomplished together because each was dependent on the other. As the Lord explained:

33 For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy;

34 And when separated, man cannot receive a fulness of joy.

35 The elements are the tabernacle of God; yea, man is the tabernacle of God, even temples; and whatsoever temple is defiled, God shall destroy that temple (D&C 93:33-35).

All material element must be brought into a perfection that is consistent with the perfection of the intelligence who inhabit it. Lehi understood that and taught:

14 And now, my sons, I speak unto you these things for your profit and learning; for there is a God, and he hath created all things, both the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are, both things to act and things to be acted upon.

15 And to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man, after he had created our first parents, and the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, and in fine, all things which are created, it must needs be that there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter.

16 Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself.

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Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other (2 Ne 2:14-16).

For celestial persons, not just their individual physical bodies but the earth also must be brought to a celestial perfection—

17 that the poor and the meek of the earth shall inherit it.

18 Therefore, it [the earth] must needs be sanctified from all unrighteousness, that it may be prepared for the celestial glory;

19 For after it hath filled the measure of its creation, it shall be crowned with glory, even with the presence of God the Father;

20 That bodies who are of the celestial kingdom may possess it forever and ever; for, for this intent was it made and created, and for this intent are they sanctified....

25 And again, verily I say unto you, the earth abideth the law of a celestial kingdom, for it filleth the measure of its creation, and transgresseth not the law—

26 Wherefore, it shall be sanctified; yea, notwithstanding it shall die, it shall be quickened again, and shall abide the power by which it is quickened, and the righteous shall inherit it (D&C 88:17b-26).

The question of creating physical cosmos (including the perfection of our own bodies) is entirely taken care of by the power of the Savior's resurrection. Similarly, the matter of spiritual cosmos is conditionally taken care of by the Savior's Atonement.

The ultimate rectitude of the Atonement's powers enables intelligences to seek and achieve perfection according to their own sense of fulfillment, wholeness, and cosmos. It can only come as the fruition of their own agencies—the product of their individual self-identification and the ultimate maturation of the laws of their own beings.

Perfection is a state of wholeness. Moroni described celestial perfection as being "holy, without spot" (Moroni 10:33). Paul described it as "holy and without blame before him in love" (Ephesians 1:4). Mormon described it as being:

... filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure (Moroni 7:48b).

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The Lord explained:

94 They who dwell in his presence are the church of the Firstborn; and they see as they are seen, and know as they are known, having received of his fulness and of his grace (D&C 76:94).

In each of those descriptions there is no incongruity within one's Self. There is only perfect harmony—"holy [whole, complete, perfect] without spot."

If perfection is a state of integral wholeness, but one's self-definition is something different from celestial love, then there must be accommodation for a kind of perfection (internal unity—cosmos) that is different from celestial glory. And there is, as the Lord has explained:

28 They who are of a celestial spirit shall receive the same body which was a natural body; even ye shall receive your bodies, and your glory shall be that glory by which your bodies are quickened.

29 Ye who are quickened by a portion of the celestial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness.

30 And they who are quickened by a portion of the terrestrial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness.

31 And also they who are quickened by a portion of the telestial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness.

32 And they who remain shall also be quickened; nevertheless, they shall return again to their own place, to enjoy that which they are willing to receive, because they were not willing to enjoy that which they might have received (D&C 88:28-32).

"Perfection" is a statement about a thing's wholeness, but need not necessarily be a reference to its value. Thus there can be a perfect diamond, a perfect crystal goblet, and a perfect glass window. Each may be "perfect" in its own right even though there is an enormous range in their respective values. This seems to be analogous to the three degrees of glory.

To say each is perfect only says each has internal integrity with no flaws. The value is found in the object that is perfect, not in the perfection of the object. For intelligences who

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define their sense of self in terms different from “the pure love of Christ,” there is a state of perfection and glory that is compatible with their self-definition. But for those who love as the Savior loves, the perfection of that compatibility is equivalent to eternal life. For the intelligences who receive celestial resurrected bodies, cosmos is perfect symmetry and harmony—in their physical persons, their personal sense of Self, and also in their celestial social environment. The Lord continued in section 88:

40 For intelligence cleaveth unto intelligence; wisdom receiveth wisdom; truth embraceth truth; virtue loveth virtue; light cleaveth unto light; mercy hath compassion on mercy and claimeth her own; justice continueth its course and claimeth its own; judgment goeth before the face of him who sitteth upon the throne and governeth and executeth all things.

41 He comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him, and all things are round about him; and he is above all things, and in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things; and all things are by him, and of him, even God, forever and ever (D&C 88:40-41).

Since the success of the entire plan of salvation has always rested upon the Savior’s providing an opportunity for people to come to this earth where they can define themselves in an environment away from the overriding influence of the presence of our Father in Heaven, a path had to be provided so that people could leave his presence and then return again. But was to enter this world’s chaos.

To enable the intelligences to achieve a final perfection of self-identification and cosmos, they had to leave the presence of God. They were given bodies and introduced into new conditions of chaos. The first was that they received a spirit body in a world where they could learn and choose to obey. From there, the intelligences (now spirit persons) were introduced into physical bodies and into our present chaotic environment where the quality of our love can be challenged by avarice, advantage, and the desire to acquire worldly things and authority. Chaos in this world is our confrontation with seemingly never-ending choices and equivocal consequences. Its value comes from having maximum opportunity to choose. We live among people whose choices cover the full range of the possibilities of good and evil, so we have ample opportunity to see the consequences of good from bad, and to choose which of their options we wish to make a part of our own Self.

It is in the tensions and contrasts of this world that we are enabled to define what and

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who we really are. We do that by identifying and seeking to replicate—and ultimately to perpetuate—the experiences and relationships in which we find fulfillment and happiness. We are here to discover for our Selves whether that fulfillment is consistent with telestial, terrestrial, or celestial glory. For us to be able to do that, this world’s environment must be full of difficult choices with inexplicable tensions and contradictions. Yet those very contradictions are necessary to the success of the plan, as Lehi explained to his sons:

24 But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things.

25 Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy (2 Nephi 2:24-25).

Joy is neither sterile nor static. It is the essence of a fruitful life. Adam’s being a gardener forever, even in Eden, would have become very tiresome. Lehi explained:

22 And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end.

23 And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin (2 Nephi 2:22-23).

A few verses later, Lehi explained that because they ate the fruit, they were placed in an environment that gave them the opportunity to be free forever:

26 And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given (2 Nephi 2:26).

It was not doing sin, but being exposed to the opportunity to do sin, that was important. Otherwise, there could be no self-definition. Some love the Lord and his children and find exquisite joy in that love. However, when people misrepresent self-

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gratification as “joy,” and seek after self-aggrandizement as “pleasurable,” they look upon the thing the prophets call joy, as tedious and unfulfilling. In the great plan, these people could not be forced to find joy in love:

12 Wherefore, it must needs have been created for a thing of naught; wherefore there would have been no purpose in the end of its creation. Wherefore, this thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes, and also the power, and the mercy, and the justice of God.

13 And if ye shall say there is no law, ye shall also say there is no sin. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness. And if there be no righteousness nor happiness there be no punishment nor misery. And if these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon; wherefore, all things must have vanished away (2 Nephi 2:12-13).

Alma taught the same principles, but in a slightly different way:

24 For behold, justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own; and thus, none but the truly penitent are saved.

25 What, do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you, Nay; not one whit. If so, God would cease to be God.

26 And thus God bringeth about his great and eternal purposes, which were prepared from the foundation of the world. And thus cometh about the salvation and the redemption of men, and also their destruction and misery.

27 Therefore, O my son, whosoever will come may come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds.

28 If he has desired to do evil, and has not repented in his days, behold, evil shall be done unto him, according to the restoration of God (Alma 42:24-28).

For Adam and his children, coming to this world was an introduction to a new kind of chaos in a darkness we had not known before. Its experience is invaluable, but to remain here would be an eternal damnation, just as remaining in the Garden would have been utterly profitless. Therefore, Lehi assured his sons:

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5 And men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil. And the law is given unto men. And by the law no flesh is justified; or, by the law men are cut off. Yea, by the temporal law they were cut off; and also, by the spiritual law they perish from that which is good, and become miserable forever (2 Nephi 2:5.)

Our coming into this chaos would have been counterproductive if a way had not been provided for us to get out and return home in the full bloom of our cognizance. Therefore a way had to be provided so we could escape. But that way appears from human perspective to be into an even greater chaos—the natural consequence of mortal sin—to be entombed by the twin monsters of death and hell. Alma and Lehi each explained:

12 And now, there was no means to reclaim men from this fallen state, which man had brought upon himself because of his own disobedience;

13 Therefore, according to justice, the plan of redemption could not be brought about, only on conditions of repentance of men in this probationary state, yea, this preparatory state; for except it were for these conditions, mercy could not take effect except it should destroy the work of justice. Now the work of justice could not be destroyed; if so, God would cease to be God.

14 And thus we see that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice; yea, the justice of God, which consigned them forever to be cut off from his presence.

15 And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an Atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also.

16 Now, repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment, which also was eternal as the life of the soul should be, affixed opposite to the plan of happiness, which was as eternal also as the life of the soul (Alma 42:12-16).

17 And I, Lehi, according to the things which I have read, must needs suppose that an angel of God, according to that which is written, had fallen from heaven; wherefore, he became a devil, having sought that which was evil before God.

18 And because he had fallen from heaven, and had become miserable forever, he

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sought also the misery of all mankind. Wherefore, he said unto Eve, yea, even that old serpent, who is the devil, who is the father of all lies, wherefore he said: Partake of the forbidden fruit, and ye shall not die, but ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil (2 Nephi 2:17-18).

17 Now, how could a man repent except he should sin? How could he sin if there was no law? How could there be a law save there was a punishment?

18 Now, there was a punishment affixed, and a just law given, which brought remorse of conscience unto man.

19 Now, if there was no law given—if a man murdered he should die—would he be afraid he would die if he should murder?

20 And also, if there was no law given against sin men would not be afraid to sin.

21 And if there was no law given, if men sinned what could justice do, or mercy either, for they would have no claim upon the creature?

22 But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth; otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God.

23 But God ceaseth not to be God, and mercy claimeth the penitent, and mercy cometh because of the Atonement; and the Atonement bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead; and the resurrection of the dead bringeth back men into the presence of God; and thus they are restored into his presence, to be judged according to their works, according to the law and justice (Alma 42:17-23).

The escape route from this world through death was explained to Adam.

15 And I, the Lord God, took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden, to dress it, and to keep it.

16 And I, the Lord God, commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat,

17 But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die (Moses 3:15-17).

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Every word in that scripture is important. “And I, the Lord God, commanded the man, saying ...But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it.” God had to forbid it. The laws of justice and mercy insist that he do so. God could not have commanded them to eat that fruit, or even told them that it would be acceptable, because if he had, then he would have been responsible for their expulsion from the Garden and into this world. If he had been responsible for putting us here, he would have been equally responsible for getting us back. That would have left us without responsibility, without agency, purpose, or the freedom be our Selves. We would have come, not to act, but to be acted upon. So his instructions were, “nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee.”

What was true of Adam and Eve was equally true of ourselves. We did not leave the premortal spirit world because we were forced to come to this earth, but because we understood our Heavenly Father’s plan and trusted in the Savior’s Atonement. We came here because we chose to come. And now, having made that decision, we are free to make the decisions about what we will do while we are here.

In those same verses, we read the words of the very first covenant that our Father in Heaven made with his earthly children: “for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

Because, from our this-worldly perspective, death is sometimes a fearful thing, those words are usually read as a curse rather than as a blessing. But they are not a curse, they are the words of the covenant that evoke one of the greatest blessings of the Atonement.

They say, “If you choose to go down into that dark and dreary world, then, after you have learned what you are supposed to learn, you may return. We are not compelled to stay there in this world because the Lord has provided a way for us to come home again—the promise is, “thou shalt surely die.”

From our earthly perspective, death is a blackened wall through which, if one passes, one cannot return again. But it is, in fact, a veil that brings us from this world of grey into a world of light. Alma added:

4 And thus we see that there was a time granted unto man to repent, yea, a probationary time, a time to repent and serve God (Alma 42:4).

Alma explained to his son:

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6 But behold, it was appointed unto man to die—therefore, as they were cut off from the tree of life they should be cut off from the face of the earth—and man became lost forever, yea, they became fallen man.

7 And now, ye see by this that our first parents were cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord; and thus we see they became subjects to follow after their own will (Alma 42:6-7).

The promise of death was the guarantee that this earth-life experience is an empowering part of the journey and not its conclusion. Death is the way out of this world. It is a foreshadowing of something beyond—of continued eternal progression. Thus, death, and the spirit world into which it introduces us (like birth and the experiences we now share), is among the greatest blessings of the Atonement. But from a human perspective it is as dark and foreboding as a closing grave. Without the final acts of the Savior's Atonement, the odyssey of the intelligences who are traversing linear time and profane space to find perfection, would have ended in the eternal darkness of death and hell. Alma understood this, and taught:

8 Now behold, it was not expedient that man should be reclaimed from this temporal death, for that would destroy the great plan of happiness.

9 Therefore, as the soul could never die, and the fall had brought upon all mankind a spiritual death as well as a temporal, that is, they were cut off from the presence of the Lord, it was expedient that mankind should be reclaimed from this spiritual death.

10 Therefore, as they had become carnal, sensual, and devilish, by nature, this probationary state became a state for them to prepare; it became a preparatory state (Alma 42:8-10).

The fullness of the creation that began with the work of Jehovah could not be accomplished until death and hell are defeated by the Savior's Atonement. As in the great temple drama, when the Atonement was accomplished, cosmos, light, and life arose from all the benighted domains of hatred and chaos:

11 And now remember, my son, if it were not for the plan of redemption (laying it aside) as soon as they were dead their souls were miserable, being cut off from the presence of the Lord (Alma 42:11).

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Thus, the Savior's triumphs at Gethsemane, on the cross, in the congregation of the dead, and in the tomb of the resurrection—all of those triumphs together constituted the culminating acts of creation—of bringing order to chaos and establishing eternal cosmos. This could only be done by the Savior.

The prophets of all ages have testified of the Atonement, and the ancient Israelite Feast of Tabernacles temple drama brought its reality into sharp and tangible focus. Near its conclusion it portrayed the death of the king (and symbolically of all mankind) and showed that Jehovah himself would descend into death and hell, and he would rescue the entombed king. Psalm 18 recounts that event from the king's perspective:

- 4 The sorrows of death compassed me,
 and the floods of ungodly men made me afraid.
5 The sorrows of hell compassed me about:
 the snares of death prevented me.
6 In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried unto my God:
 he heard my voice out of his temple,
 and my cry came before him, even into his ears (Psalm 18:4-6).

In that same psalm, the king tells why Jehovah had condescended to do this. Later, in the Beatitudes, Jesus cited this psalm as a reciprocal promise to those who are merciful to others:

- 20 The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness;
 according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me ...
24 Therefore hath the Lord recompensed me according to my righteousness,
 according to the cleanness of my hands in his eyesight.
25 With the merciful thou wilt shew thyself merciful;
 with an upright man thou wilt shew thyself upright;
26 With the pure thou wilt shew thyself pure (Psalm 18:20, 24-26a).

The Beatitude simply says:

And blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy (3 Nephi 12:7).

The Book of Mormon prophets had a perfect understanding of this principle of

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salvation, and they spoke of it often.⁸²² Lehi's explanation is one of the easiest to understand:

6 Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth.

7 Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered.

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.

9 Wherefore, he is the firstfruits unto God, inasmuch as he shall make intercession for all the children of men; and they that believe in him shall be saved.

10 And because of the intercession for all, all men come unto God; wherefore, they stand in the presence of him, to be judged of him according to the truth and holiness which is in him. Wherefore, the ends of the law which the Holy One hath given, unto the inflicting of the punishment which is affixed, which punishment that is affixed is in opposition to that of the happiness which is affixed, to answer the ends of the Atonement—

11 For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, my first-born in the wilderness, righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility (2 Nephi 2:6-11).

The powers exercised by the Savior in the beginning were the same powers by which he defeated death and hell. Those powers are his perfection of character and his

⁸²² See also, 2 Nephi 9; 2 Nephi 28:19-27; Jacob 3:10-14; Alma 5:6-11, 13:27-31.

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lovingkindness. These are expressed most beautifully in his own recitation of his prayer of Atonement. He said:

1 Hearken, O ye people of my church, to whom the kingdom has been given; hearken ye and give ear to him who laid the foundation of the earth, who made the heavens and all the hosts thereof, and by whom all things were made which live, and move, and have a being.

2 And again I say, hearken unto my voice, lest death shall overtake you; in an hour when ye think not the summer shall be past, and the harvest ended, and your souls not saved.

3 Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—

4 Saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified;

5 Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life (D&C 45:1-5).

Finally, we have this testimony from the Prophet Joseph Smith. It is part of *A Vision*, his poetic version of the revelation that is now section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

And while I did meditate what it all meant,
The Lord touch'd the eyes of my own intellect.

Hosanna, for ever! They open'd anon,
And the glory of God shone around where I was;
And there was the Son at the Father's right hand,
In a fulness of glory and holy applause.

I beheld round the throne holy angels and hosts,
And sanctified beings from worlds that have been,
In holiness worshiping God and the Lamb,
For ever and ever. Amen and amen.
And now after all of the proofs made of him,
By witnesses truly, by whom he was known,

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This is mine, last of all, that he lives; yea, he lives!
And sits at the right hand of God on his throne.

And I heard a great voice bearing record from heav'n,
He's the Savior and only begotten of God;
By him, of him, and through him, the worlds were all made,
Even all that careen in the heavens so broad.

Whose inhabitants, too, from the first to the last,
Are sav'd by the very same Savior of ours;
And, of course, are begotten God's daughters and sons
By the very same truths and the very same powers.⁸²³

Thus, as Lehi, Alma, and the ancient temple drama so clearly taught, all the covenants made at and before the Council in Heaven are fulfilled through the Savior's Atonement. Perfect order is accomplished in material things through the resurrection, and perfect order is given the intelligences according to the expansiveness or limitations with which they choose to define themselves. Perfect Love brings Perfect Love. All else is perfected in its own right. The only chaos remaining is for those who choose "to enjoy that which they are willing to receive, because they were not willing to enjoy that which they might have received" (D&C 88:32).

⁸²³ The Prophet Joseph Smith rewrote the vision that is now the 76th Section of the Doctrine and Covenants in poetic form. It was published in the *Times and Seasons*, February 1, 1843, and republished in the *Millennial Star*, August, 1843. The poem has features that are strikingly different from the canonical version. The poem is very personal, speaking only in the first person about Joseph's own experiences. One gets the impression that this version, although it is written after the same pattern as the D&C section, is a composite description of many such visions, including the First Vision.