



## atonement series #1

fall: our need of atonement

all mankind must unavoidably perish

alma 34.<sup>9</sup>

*"According to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish; yea, all are hardened; yea, all are fallen and are lost, and must perish except it be through the atonement which it is expedient should be made."*

### introduction

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We begin our study of atonement with a homily on the first in a series of scriptures that depict our need for atonement. Here, we encounter Amulek's assessment of mankind and the desperate state in which we find ourselves. It is uncompromising, obviously heart-felt, and possesses an unmistakable seriousness of purpose. Before we examine his assessment, a brief reminder of its context is in order.<sup>1</sup>

Alma the Younger—truly, in my mind, one of the greatest preachers, ministers, evangelists in all scripture and of all time—has heard tales of a deep apostacy taking place among a fringe group of Nephites known as Zoramites. These are the infamous people of Rameumptom fame. Alma journeys into their territory, Antionum, with a recent convert,

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I will treat the narrative seriously and use it as it is written. As is my habit, I will let others with a higher pay grade or more intelligence than I fuss over questions of historicity.

Amulek, and several other evangelists—some seasoned and battle-tested, some less experienced—in tow.<sup>2</sup> He intends to investigate the reports of apostacy and, if finding them true, to labor in reclaiming the willfully ignorant and rebellious<sup>3</sup> people.

Having arrived, the party of ministers observes Zoramite worship, with its arrogant, delusional, and self-serving prayer, and witnesses the injustice by which the Zoramites live— injustice perpetuated by the false theology expressed repeatedly in their cultic prayer at Rameumptom. Sadly, the small group of evangelists finds that reports of the Zoramite apostacy have not been exaggerated.

Alma, knowing of God’s intense love for and commitment to even this deeply flawed people, is, himself, deeply pained. He expresses his anguish in a long prayer in which he laments the wicked foolishness he has witnessed among the Zoramites.

“And he lifted up his voice to heaven, and cried, saying: ‘O, how long, O Lord, wilt thou suffer that thy servants shall dwell here below in the flesh, to behold such gross wickedness among the children of men? .... O Lord God, how long wilt thou suffer that such wickedness and infidelity shall be among this people? O Lord, wilt thou give me strength, that I may bear with mine infirmities. For I am infirm, and such wickedness among this people doth pain my soul. O Lord, my heart is exceedingly sorrowful; wilt thou comfort my soul in Christ. O Lord, wilt thou grant unto me that I may have strength, that I may suffer with patience these afflictions which shall come upon me, because of the iniquity of this people. O Lord, wilt thou comfort my soul...’”<sup>4</sup>

Having allowed himself a moment of self-pity, and petitioning God to comfort him in his deep soul-wounds, Alma pleads that God give him and his companions good success in their attempt to reclaim the Zoramites.

“O Lord, wilt thou grant unto us that we may have success in bringing them again unto

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<sup>2</sup> See Alma 31.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Alma 31.<sup>8</sup> and 34.2

<sup>4</sup> Alma 31.<sup>26, 30-32</sup>

thee in Christ. Behold, O Lord, their souls are precious, and many of them are our brethren; therefore, give unto us, O Lord, power and wisdom that we may bring these, our brethren, again unto thee.”<sup>5</sup>

Finishing his sincere and sorrowful prayer, Alma “clap[s] his hands upon all them who were with him,” whereupon “they were filled with the holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> The group separates, Alma and Amulek going off together. Immediately, we find them on a hill named, Onidah, from which they, like Paul on Mars Hill, begin to preach. Alma, the more experienced preacher, begins. His sermon is found in Alma 32.<sup>8</sup>-33.<sup>23</sup>.

After Alma’s long discourse, Amulek arises to add his witness to that of his “senior” companion. His witness is found in Alma 34.<sup>2-41</sup>. While Alma based much of his message on scripture, utilizing the words of prophets such as Zenos Zenock, and Moses, Amulek, less experienced and, likely, less well-read, preaches from his own personal testimony without making recourse to the words of others—prophets or no.

“And now, behold, I will testify unto you of myself that these things are true.”<sup>7</sup>

Today’s homily, then, focuses on just one of the many principles about which Amulek feels deeply, and about which he testified to the hardened Zoramites.

**d**eeply felt, without compromise

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“There must be an atonement made, or else Mankind perish.”

There. There you have Amulek’s opening gambit and the focus of this homily. It is his assessment of humankind in a nutshell. However, as the reader no doubt senses, our summary of Amulek’s assessment is not as he states it. It is, in fact, a woefully inadequate expression of the man’s deep feelings as revealed through the intensity of his language. So,

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<sup>5</sup> Alma 31.<sup>34-35</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Alma 31.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Alma 34.<sup>8</sup>

we will want to have a look at the layers of shell that surround the nut: his core assessment of humanity.

Here, again, is his assessment of humankind:

“According to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish; yea, all are hardened; yea, all are fallen and are lost, and must perish except it be through the atonement which it is expedient should be made.”

An experienced writer, author, speaker, preacher, or no, Amulek’s statement is meaningfully structured. It ends as it begins. We can think of this technique as that of an envelope. Here are the two sides, back and front of the envelope. First, the front:

“According to the great plan of the Eternal God *there must be an atonement made...*

And here is the back side of the envelope:

“...except it be through the atonement *which it is expedient should be made.*”

We will label the envelope: “expediency.” On front, “there *must* be.” On back, “it is *expedient.*” “Suitable,” “fit,” “helpful,” “useful,” “advisable,” “judicious,” “prudent,” “tactical,” “wise:” these are all synonyms for “expedient.” Amulek’s, however, is an “expediency” that is mandatory. The expedient and mandatory element of the envelope: atonement. As envelopes do, Amulek’s envelope contains a message. Its message: atonement. We might, then, expect Amulek’s discourse to center on atonement.

It does.

However, slipped between the front and back cover of this particular literary envelope, as with all envelopes, is another message every bit as mandatory and expedient.

“all mankind must unavoidably perish; yea, all are hardened; yea, all are fallen and are lost, and must perish.”

This is the message of this 9<sup>th</sup> verse of Alma 34. Here, you will remember our summary of Amulek’s assessment and note, again, the inadequacy of the summary.

“There must be an atonement made, or else Mankind perish.”

Now, we can begin to add the layers. “Mankind.” Today, we might rather say humankind, not out of political correctness, but to be sure that we understand that what is said about “mankind” applies to every human—male and female alike. None are exempt.

And this is just the point. Wouldn’t you think that if someone mentioned “mankind,” it would be understood that they meant every living human being? So, what’s up with Amulek’s “all:” “*all* mankind.” Maybe it’s just me, but, the “all” seems unnecessary, redundant. But, Amulek likes this word: “all.”

“*ALL* are hardened.” “*ALL* are fallen” and, by association, “*ALL* are lost.”

O.K., O.K. Uncle. I get it. We are, all of us, troubled and in trouble. We are all, every single one of us, in our hearts, harder than a nutshell. We are all, without exception fallen. Ouch, a fall hurts. This is fall from which “we’ve fallen and we can’t get up.” Who will lift us from our prone, vulnerable position? We are, each and every one, lost. Who is going to give us directions, or, better, who is going to carry us through the desert to safety?<sup>8</sup>

‘nough said, Amulek. We get it.

Well, apparently not, ‘cause Amulek ain’t done yet. In fact, he’s just getting warmed up.

“*ALL* mankind *must* perish.”

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<sup>8</sup> See Luke 15.<sup>4-7</sup>

Man, oh man. Amulek is intent on not letting us off the hook. “Must.” Just in case we didn’t understand that thrice repeated “all,” he added that “must.” And repeated it twice! Apparently, to Amulek’s way of thinking (and feeling!) it is not enough to say “mankind perish,” or “all mankind perish.” It is not true enough, just yet. He must add that “must:” “*ALL* mankind *MUST* perish.”

Dang, Amulek, you done yet? Surely you’re done, made your point. We get it. In spades.

“Uh, actually, no. Not done yet. Still have another screw to turn. The rack must be made more secure. Tighter.”

Ready?

Ready or not, here it comes.

“*ALL* mankind *MUST* *unavoidably* perish.”

Really, Amulek? You’re really going there? Now you’re just showing off. Piling up the word count. “Must” does not need an accompanying “unavoidably.” “Must” *is* “unavoidable.” My English teacher would draw a big red circle around this sentence: “Redundant verbiage. Simplify.”

Nope. Not a chance.

Apparently, Amulek comes from the same school of thought as the old Colonial era preacher, Solomon Stoddard.

“Men must be led into the Understanding of the badness of their Hearts and the strictness of the Law, before they will be convinced of the Preciousness of Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

But, perhaps such a witness as Reverend Stoddard is too unorthodox. Well, how about a

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<sup>9</sup> In *Seasons of Refreshing*, Keith J. Hardman, p. 45.

Latter-day Saint prophet by the name of Benson? Is he orthodox enough?

“Just as a man does not really desire food until he is hungry, so he does not desire the salvation of Christ until he knows why he needs Christ.

“No one adequately and properly knows why he needs Christ until he understands and accepts the doctrine of the Fall and its effects upon all mankind.”<sup>10</sup>

Amulek’s seriousness of purpose is unmistakable. He could hardly be clearer. He intends to make sure we cannot miss the dire consequences of the fall. “ALL mankind MUST UNAVOIDABLY perish.” He has left us all, unavoidably without an out.

And remember why our perishing must be unavoidable. We are ALL hardened. We are ALL fallen. We are ALL lost. I will allow the reader to turn for themselves to scripture and see what they have to say about the states of hardness, fallenness, and lostness. Here is but one.

“For the time cometh, saith the Lamb of God, that I will work a great and a marvelous work among the children of men; a work which shall be everlasting, either on the one hand or on the other—either to the convincing of them unto peace and life eternal, or unto the deliverance of them to the *hardness* of their hearts and the blindness of their minds unto their being *brought down into captivity*, and also into *destruction*, both temporally and spiritually, according to the *captivity of the devil*.”<sup>11</sup>

Hmm. Not good. Very dire. Maybe Amulek was right to turn up the heat.

deadly human self-assertion

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We might chalk Amulek’s intensity up to a uniquely hardened audience. My guess is that his audience’s hardness was not so unique, but, lets have a look at it.

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<sup>10</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and A Warning*, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Nephi 14:7

As the Zoramite's vain and repetitious prayer reveals, the society labored under multiple and layered errors. These errors created a most egregiously unjust society. To be sure, their denial of Christ as expressed in their prayer and their way of life was a deadly flaw. One must wonder, though, how and why they denied him. Had they come under the influence of one of the Book of Mormon's greatest and most malicious anti-Christ's, Korihor?

During his twisted "anti-ministry" Korihor had offered political, ideological, and practical arguments against the existence and power of Christ. From the political side, he argued that an appeal to Christ was simply a power grab on the part of religious leaders.<sup>12</sup> From the philosophical side, he disavowed the possibility of knowing anything about the future<sup>13</sup>—as if "atonement" is limited to a particular moment or age, past, present or future. From a practical perspective, Korihor looked around him, observed his successful and failed peers, and concluded that one succeeded or failed based upon one's life management skills, genius, and exertion.<sup>14</sup>

No doubt, these and many other factors led Korihor down the forbidden path and into the mists of darkness. But, in the end, when all is said and done, it is Korihor himself who confesses that he denied Christ because doing so won him personal wealth, power, and prestige.<sup>15</sup> His doctrine brought success. His success produced entrenchment.

As Alma's evaluation concerning Zoramite society shows, it was obsessed with these same false tokens of a false and adulterous god.<sup>16</sup> Their temporal successes led them to believe, and confess in a short, just-over-200-word prayer, that they were an "elected" people,<sup>17</sup> a "holy" people,<sup>18</sup> a "saved" people,<sup>19</sup> and a "chosen" people,<sup>20</sup> Like the proud Pharisee who sanctimoniously stood in the temple and thanked God that he was nothing like the sinner

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<sup>12</sup> Alma 30.<sup>23-28</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Alma 30.<sup>13-15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Alma 30.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Alma 30.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Alma 31.<sup>24-25, 28</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Alma 31.<sup>16 & 17 (twice)</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Alma 31.<sup>16 & 18</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Alma 31.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Alma 31.<sup>18</sup>



standing next to him,<sup>21</sup> the Zoramites were proud that they were wiser and freer than others. No doubt, if they were alive today we would hear them ignorantly boasting of their supposed exceptionalism.

Who, then, can blame Amulek for going so hot and heavy, utilizing what seems like over the top rhetoric? How does one convince those convinced of their own rightness that they are not? Convince them that they need Christ? Convince them that without Christ they perish, must perish, must unavoidably perish? How does one convince the independently successful that they are hardened, fallen, and lost?

One cannot be delicate in such circumstances. One must come out swinging. One must thrust savagely with the powerful and sharpened double-edged sword of almighty God, believing that it can and will do its worst, or best, as it pierces and divides asunder the soul and spirit, thus discerning and revealing the thoughts and intents of the heart.<sup>22</sup>

I suppose the question for us is: Are we better than the Zoramites? Are we less hardened? Do we bask in our own exceptionalism any less than they?

Are we in any less need of the intense and redundant language of a serious and committed Amulek-like preacher?

I'll let you be the judge.

Just for the record, we will say here, though, that, as things turned out, it was the more humble, the poorer, the less enamored with the false ideology of exceptionalism that responded to Alma and Amulek's reclamation efforts. This is the subject for another homily, however.

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<sup>21</sup> See Luke 18.<sup>9-14</sup>

<sup>22</sup>See Hebrews 4.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

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In order to want Christ, we must first understand how desperately we need Christ. The objective of this first title—“Our Need for Atonement”—in our series of seven titles focused on atonement is to establish the truth of our desperate need of Christ. This recognition may, almost certainly should produce a crisis that drives us to “seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written;” drives us to repent and reform. Only then, may “the grace of God the Father, and also the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of them... be and abide in [us] forever.”<sup>23</sup> This is what he came to earth to live and die for. This is our hope and peace. This is the reason that we sing praises to him forever and ever.

As Amulek ministered to the self-righteous, self-assured, and delusionally exceptional Zoramites, it was his first task to establish the need, create the crisis, and bring his unwilling flock to Christ. In doing so, He resorted to intense and redundant, but not exaggerated language. No, his language is not exaggerated.

We humans are an unruly lot. Hardened, yes. Fallen, yes. Lost, yes. Indeed, “such is the weakness of man, and such his frailties, that *he is liable to sin continually.*”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as Jared’s nameless brother so boldly and faithfully confessed, “we are unworthy before thee; because of the fall *our natures have become evil continually.*”<sup>25</sup> “Children,” are we, “conceived in sin” so that as we “begin to grow up, *sin conceiveth in [our] hearts*”<sup>26</sup>— here, scripture rips from our hands the deception that we tell ourselves: Satan is the father of sin.

“They are all gone aside,  
they are *all together become filthy*:

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<sup>23</sup> Ether 12.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Lectures on Faith, Lecture Third, Questions and answers; emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup> Ether 3.<sup>2</sup>; emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Moses 6.<sup>55</sup>; emphasis added. Not, please: this comes from the great patriarch, Enoch, not Martin Luther or John Calvin.

there is *none that doeth good,*  
*no, not one.*”<sup>27</sup>

“*But we are all as an unclean thing,*  
*and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags;*

and we all do fade as a leaf;  
and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.”<sup>28</sup>

Yes, Paul’s first and truest anthropological observation is inescapable, unavoidable:

“*All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.*”<sup>29</sup>

But, I am beginning to sound like Amulek. No? Piling on in this fashion?

Yet, it seems, it is necessary. For Joseph Smith’s inescapable and unavoidable truth is Jared’s nameless brother’s inescapable and unavoidable truth is Enoch’s inescapable and unavoidable truth is the Psalmist’s inescapable and unavoidable truth is Isaiah’s inescapable and unavoidable truth is Paul’s inescapable and unavoidable truth is Amulek’s inescapable and unavoidable truth (how’s that for a run-on sentence?): without Christ and his infinite atonement, WE. ALL. MUST. UNAVOIDABLY. PERISH.”

Thus, doth “my soul delighteth in proving unto my people that save Christ should come all men must perish.”<sup>30</sup>

“Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”

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<sup>27</sup> Psalm 14.<sup>3</sup>; emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> Isaiah 64.<sup>6</sup>; emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> Romans 3.<sup>23</sup>; emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup> 2 Nephi 11.<sup>6</sup>