



Meditation 4

Atonement: an eternal and divine characteristic of god

In our two previous meditations, we have 1) highlighted the LDS preference for the word “atonement” in discussing Jesus’ salvific work, and 2) presented our understanding of the word. We understand the word, “atonement”—a word invented by Tyndale and composed of the preposition, ‘at,’ the number, ‘one,’ and the nominal suffix, ‘-ment’ (at-one-ment)—to have the fundamental meaning of “unity,” “connectedness,” “linkage,” “attachment.”

The word signifies God’s eternal feeling of connectedness to and with us. Jesus came as God’s revelation of this attachment, to make known His unity with human beings and the extremes to which Deity would go to reveal and maintain that connectedness. Jesus did not, then, “create” or “bring about” atonement as if it were something new. It has always existed in God’s bosom. Jesus’ atonement, is his revelation of this divine and eternal character trait.

I have occasionally heard individuals refer to a time “before the Atonement,” by which, they seem to understand all time before Jesus of Nazareth was born and “wrought” the Atonement, to use Doctrine and Covenants language (See DC 76.⁶⁹; 138.³⁵). These individuals seem to believe that “the Atonement came into being on a small patch of land on planet earth in a 72-hour period—between Jesus’ entering the garden of Gethsemane on a Thursday night and being resurrected on Sunday morning—in the year designated A.D. 33.¹ Of course, quoting passages such as the following, they concede that “the” Atonement had an impact on individuals and the cosmos before Jesus’ earthly ministry.

¹ Or, thereabouts, depending on one’s understanding of chronology.

“For, for this intent have we written these things, that they may know that we knew of Christ, and we had a hope of his glory many hundred years before his coming; and not only we ourselves had a hope of his glory, but also all the holy prophets which were before us” (Jac. 4.⁴).

“And the Lord God hath sent his holy prophets among all the children of men, to declare these things to every kindred, nation, and tongue, that thereby whosoever should believe that Christ should come, the same might receive remission of their sins, and rejoice with exceedingly great joy, even as though he had already come among them” (Mos. 3.¹³).

The capacity of “the” Atonement to have impact before its actual existence, they sometimes explain, is due to the foreknowledge of God which allowed him to work out a plan knowing that it would happen in the future. For as long as God or time or space existed B.C., the entire universe and the salvation of all beings depended upon the events that transpired in this tight time frame and on this rather smallish planet. Some, with a little more theological “sophistication” go further to explain that since God lives outside of time “the” Atonement should not be viewed as part of the divine future but of the divine and eternal present. The time and space bound events of “the” Atonement” were always present with God.

Now, I am under as big a disadvantage and as much in over my head as anyone else when trying to understand and explain infinite things. But I have a different view of atonement than the one described—I hope fairly, if inadequately—above. My first departure from the previous view can be intuited by my use of quotation marks in “the” Atonement. Rarely do I speak of “the” Atonement. Rather, I speak of “atonement.”

“The atonement” seems to signify something that belongs exclusively to Jesus. It is something that only he could “do.” It is a definite thing he did at a definite place at a definite time. But, in my view, “atonement” is something—unity, connectedness—that God, the Father, possesses in Himself. It is a unity with others that God, the Son, also possessing, came to reveal. It is a connectedness that God, the Son, portrayed throughout his life on earth, including in his final hours. It was, of course, present and revealed before Jesus. Therefore, people could know and experience it. However, the full extent, the radicalness of God’s attachment to humanity was most clearly and fully revealed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God.

There was no time before atonement existed—not because God is outside of time or because he perfectly anticipated Jesus’ accomplishment—but because atonement is a trait that exists and always

has existed in God. Jesus did not bring connectedness to God into being. But he did, being God, Himself, more perfectly than any other messenger reveal God's radical and inalterable connectedness and devotion to each of us.

In Christ, we find stronger evidence of God's unity with us and thus an increase of faith and trust in Him. His eternal connectedness to and with us informs our own response to the sin and weakness that is so deeply ingrained in us. Knowing of His eternal at-one-ment with us, we have confidence to approach him in spite of our sin and weakness and thus receive the help we so desperately need if we are to overcome sin and weakness. Knowing of His eternal at-one-ment with us, we are able to tap into the power that only He can provide as we seek not only to overcome sin and weakness but to positively grow, progress and advance in divine character. Knowing of His eternal at-one-ment with us, our hope in a more enduring life than that which we find here in mortality grows.

Without Jesus' revelation of God's connectedness with and to us, there is and could be no hope in sin and weakness, no hope of a more enduring existence, and no hope of an enduring advancement and progress. The view of Jesus' atonement as revelation of a divine at-one-ment that has always existed in God's bosom is far more than a "moral theory" of atonement. It is as fundamentally salvific as any other theory.

This view of atonement is new and difficult for some. Thus, we will repeat ourselves over and over again as we try to understand it better. We will illustrate it over and over again, especially through our examination of the life and ministry of Jesus.

Even so, come, Lore Jesus!