



atonement series #1

at-one-ment: the savior's unity and connectedness with us

he also himself likewise took part of the same

hebrews 2.⁹⁻¹⁸

⁹But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man. ¹⁰For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. ¹¹For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, ¹²saying, "I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee."

¹³And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Behold I and the children which God hath given me."

¹⁴Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; ¹⁵and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

¹⁶For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham.

¹⁷Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.

Introduction

We are studying atonement under ten titles:

"Fall: Our Need of Atonement"

“Grace: The Savior’s Generous and Earnest Invitation”
“At-one-ment: The Savior’s unity and connectedness with us”
“Sacrifice: What Jesus Suffered for Us”
“Glorification: The Savior’s Resurrection, Ascension, and Enthronement”
“Justification: How We Repent and Change”
“Renewal: The Hope, Joy, Peace, and Power of Atonement”
“Sanctification: Imitating and Living a Life of At-one-ment”
“Thanksgiving: In Praise of Atonement”
“Song of the Righteous: A Prayer unto Me”

We will cycle through this series of titles several times, each time examining a different scripture passage that reflects each title. As part of this *1st Series*, we have already explored our first title, “Fall: Our Need of Atonement,” through a study of Alma 34.⁸⁻⁹. Here, marshalling intense, uncompromising, and repetitive language along with the effective use of the literary device known as an envelope, Amulek instructed a live audience as to why humankind was in such dire need of atonement.

“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.”

Without God’s participation in our lives, without his connectedness to us, humanity’s only destiny would be annihilation.

In examining our second title, “Grace: The Savior’s Generous and Earnest Invitation,” we remained in the Book of Mormon and explored 3 Nephi 11.¹²⁻¹⁷, a small portion of one of the Book’s most cherished narratives—the Savior’s personal visit to the Nephites.

A year after multiple and historic natural disasters had shattered Nephite society, the survivors continued to feel shock at the devastation, and a sense of hopelessness about the future. It was into this depressing setting that Jesus condescended from his powerful and

privileged place at the right hand of God to act as comforter, healer, and restorer. Exercising the beautiful spirit of acceptance that is central to his character—his grace—Jesus invited a multitude of 2500 devastated individuals to “Come forth unto me” “one by one” that “ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet.” This invitation, many hours in its fulfillment, healed, restored, and forever changed those so privileged. Discovering Jesus’ sense of connectedness with them, feeling newly connected to him, and learning from the abundant connectedness—at-one-ment—that they saw exemplified in and by him, they became a united people and embarked on a two hundred year odyssey of societal unity, peace, and at-one-ment.

Jesus’ welcoming invitations, ever extended, are generous and earnest. If accepted, they transform individuals and societies. At the same time, such condescending invitations cost Jesus dearly. His at-one-ment, his sense of connectedness to us, his willingness to act upon the attachment that he feels, and his desire to reveal such commitment to us drives him to extreme measures.

Today’s text, studied under the rubric of our third title, “At-one-ment: the Savior’s Unity and Connectedness with us,” reveals just how far this gracious, generous, and earnest God is willing to go in order to make his at-one-ment, his connectedness known to fatally disconnected mortal beings.

It is after much thought that I have selected Hebrews 4.⁹⁻¹⁵ as the first passage with which we will explore “atonement” directly. Obviously, all the other titles in our *Course on Atonement* have something to do with atonement: why, for example, we need it, or how we apply it, or what Jesus suffered to reveal it, or how it impacts the way we live, etc. But this title, “At-one-ment: the Savior’s Unity and Connectedness with us,” looks directly into the brilliance of what atonement really means to and for deity.

Today’s homily, then, will allow us our first opportunity to look at an infinite atonement and attempt through the finite human mind and the resources of shallow human language to establish as best we can its most basic meaning. In doing so, it is doubtlessly true that even if we were to be beneficiaries of the most intimate inspiration of which mortals are capable, we

would yet be most fortunate to reach even a kinder-garden level of understanding of that infinite atonement.

Yes, atonement is that big. It encompasses the entire known universe, and then extends out into the unknown universes of eternity.

Of god, angels, prophets, and humankind

If it is too much to say that context is everything in examining any text, it is not an exaggeration to say it is vitally important. So, in considering the passage under study in this homily, we should set the stage. The writer of Hebrews begins his work with one, long, four-verse sentence.

“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.”¹

There is enough in this single sentence for its own series of multiple homilies. For now, we will limit our discussion to the following three observations.

First, verses one and two remind us that while we can appreciate the ministry of prophets—past to be sure, but present and future as well—with Jesus’ ministry we enter a ministry far, far superior. Hebrews’ author will return to this theme more than once.

Second, the sentence ends with a reminder that Jesus’ ministry is superior to that of angels, whom Deity so often used and uses as messengers of some divine word. Thus, the sentence

¹ Hebrews 1.¹⁻⁴

begins and ends with statements affirming Jesus' preeminence—preeminence over prophets and preeminence over angels.

Third, and central both to the sentence and its message, the reason for Jesus' superiority over prophet and angel is highlighted. Jesus is “the express image” of God, the Father. Here, whatever we wish to think about “physical appearances,” we should principally think of this as a comment concerning Jesus' “character” or “nature.” In character, Jesus is indistinguishable from his Heavenly Father. Jesus is, in fact, as John witnessed, more than “with God,” he *is* God.² We must always remember that this witness is also central to the Book of Mormon message—“the most correct of any Book...”

“Have they not said that *God himself should come down* among the children of men, and take upon him the form of man, and go forth in mighty power upon the face of the earth?”³

It is patently obvious that Jesus is superior to any messenger, whether prophet or angel. The truth of this requires no great amount of thinking or pondering or praying. That “*God himself*,” would come down and dwell among men borders on the ridiculous and grotesque. Believing this requires something beyond thought or even prayer. It requires a close encounter of another kind.

Having “come down among the children of men,” and then returned to the bosom of God, the Father, from whence he came, Jesus continues his ministry “among the children of men” from the intimate and privileged place “on the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

No such things can be said of either prophet, even the greatest of them, or angel. Not, in fact, even close. Joseph Smith's followers might claim that Joseph Smith did more for the salvation of mankind than any other, except Jesus.⁴ But, his is a very, very distant second place. So far behind Jesus is he, in fact, that at the cosmic level he is just a step or two ahead

² John 1.¹⁻²

³ Mosiah 13.³⁴; emphasis added

⁴ See DC 135.³

of whatever man or woman such speculation might think of as being in last place.

To drive the message of Jesus' preeminence home, Hebrews' author follows up this introductory statement and ends the first chapter with a series of Biblical quotations—seven of them... he loves this number, seven, and uses it repeatedly to focus the mind on the “perfection” of Christ. Each quotation emphasizes the superiority of Jesus, his ministry, and his destiny over angels with their ministries and destinies.

Chapter two begins with a four-verse admonition. Such admonitions are interspersed throughout the Book. We then read another quote from Psalms, already the sixth from this influential Book.

“What is man, that thou art mindful of him?
or the son of man, that thou visitest him?
Thou madest him a little lower than the angels;
thou crownedst him with glory and honour,
and didst set him over the works of thy hands:
Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet.”⁵

This Psalm passage,⁶ with its questions and wonder, stirs wonder and wonderment in the Book's author.

“For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing that is not put under him.
But now we see not yet all things put under him.”⁷

What, indeed, is a human being? Why is Deity so solicitous of them when he is so superior and they are “lower than the angels”? What is the human potential? What heights can the human being achieve? It is this wonderment and such questions that lead the Book's author to the passage upon which this homily is focused. There is so very much here.

⁵ Hebrews 2.⁶⁻⁸

⁶ From the 8th Psalm.

⁷ Hebrews 2.⁸

We begin with this.

“Both he that sanctifieth [Jesus] and they who are sanctified [humans] are all of one.”

With this verse’s affirmation that Jesus and mortals “are all of one” it ought to be obvious that we have entered the world of at-one-ment. It bears witness to the connectedness that Jesus possesses and feels for us. He is, therefore, as the writer of Hebrews says, “not afraid [or reluctant, hesitant] to call them brethren.”

We are like family to him. Now, you can do the whole traditional Mormon family thing, speak of Jesus as your “elder brother,” say that we *are* family, and that that is the point. But, by the same tradition, so is Lucifer... family, that is, connected by some sort of cosmic DNA. But, Lucifer doesn’t act like family. He doesn’t possess any familiar feelings. He feels no connectedness with us. Only antipathy.

No, unsurprisingly, the writer of Hebrews is not doing the traditional Mormon cosmic family thing here. The point Hebrews is making is a marvel and a wonder: Jesus, God, FEELS something for us. He truly feels a connection to us. And these connective feelings drove him to do something extraordinary. He became one of us, here, on earth, to share in our every human experience: every pain and every joy; every failure and every success; every disappointment and heart ache and every hope.... EVERYTHING.

It is an extraordinary act of camaraderie, attachment, and unity, this incarnation of God. I mean, he of godly character and glory—indeed, he, a God—came down to this filthy, rat infested (and I am not just referring to the four-legged kind), godforsaken planet. And before you start going off on how naturally good we are because we are “children of God,” I will just remind you that in reward for his touching commitment to us we killed him. Murdered him. Committed deicide. Drove spikes through God’s flesh and hung him up to die a slow agonizing death. Some planet we have here. Such brotherly love we have here. Such natural goodness. With family like this, who needs enemies? With “good people” like this where is

there room for “evil”?

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that in coming to earth and being “in all things... made like unto his brethren”— think at-one-ment—Jesus went all the way and became like us in every way. He, God, took up a body of “flesh and blood” and suffered all its afflictions because and as we did. This was an act of atonement, attachment, and unity. We see at-one-ment at work in his very first moments on earth, as he struggled, as we all did, to take that very first breath. We see at-one-ment as he laid so peacefully in the hay of an animal trough, and grew through childhood, all the while subject to and helplessly dependent upon another to care for and nourish him. Yes, in these acts we see at-one-ment, attachment, as plainly as we see it in his final gasps for air on the cross.

In being “in all things... made like unto his brethren,” Jesus also “himself hath suffered being tempted.” Imagine that! God was tempted, tried, tested, pushed to the limits because and as we are tempted, tried, tested, and pushed to our limits. Truly, this is at-one-ment; not Jesus making us one with him or with Father or with each other, but God’s *being* one with us. What a revelation! What sacrifice!

He suffered because and as we suffer.

“And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind... and he will take upon him their infirmities.”⁸

In fact, he would be tempted and tried and tested and pushed to limits such that no other human being ever has been or ever will be—ever could be. He was pushed to limits that would bring annihilation to any other being, from second to last place.

“And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his

⁸ See Alma 7.¹¹⁻¹²

people.”⁹

This is all much more profound than some kind of “substitutionary” effort. He is simply that “attached” to us. Feels that much unity with us. What we experience, he can’t help but experience too because of his connectedness. We have noted Paul’s analogy before. If one part of the body suffers, the entire body suffers.¹⁰ Jesus, we, we are “of one.”

The writer of Hebrews is not yet finished in his survey of Christ’s connectedness to us. In being “in all things... made like unto his brethren,” and in suffering by “being tempted,” Jesus’ attachment to us drove him, finally, to go all the way and experience the last human act in mortality: “taste death for¹¹ every man.” Jesus, then, “tasted death” because and as we taste death. But, oh how grievous his death was! I don’t know if it was the worse death of all, but it was brutal and dehumanizing in the extreme.

All of these things, then, his entrance into mortality, his experience with suffering and testing, his death; all of them are acts of and part of atonement—an at-one-ment that God felt for us and that could, through its revelatory power, become real to us and experienced in our lives.

I will declare thy name

But Jesus’ revelation does more than evidence his own profound and unwavering feelings of attachment to us. In yet another quotation from Psalms, the writer of Hebrews has Jesus promising God “I will declare thy name unto my brethren.” When scripture, from Genesis to Psalms to Revelation, speaks of the “name” of Deity, it is, of course, speaking of something more than a personal appellation. His “name” is a cypher for “his character”—the kind of Being Deity is.

So it is with Jesus. Jesus’ revelation is an awesome and awe-inspiring revelation of his

⁹ Mosiah 3.⁷

¹⁰ See 1 Corinthians 12.¹⁴⁻²⁴

¹¹ This is not “in place of” or as a “substitute” because no one escapes this final curtain call.

Father. It is the greatest demonstration that heaven could conceive that Father feels exactly and precisely the same toward us as his Son, Jesus—or, rather, the Son feels exactly the same attachment to humanity as his Father. They are, after all, one.

The Book of Hebrews, remember, in language that has justifiably baffled, began by informing us that Jesus is “the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person.”¹² This is in line with what we are told elsewhere, repeatedly, about Jesus. “In him” Paul says of Jesus, “dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily”¹³—a mouthful it itself.

But, of more importance and authority than these apostolic witnesses, Jesus himself taught that he, “the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.”¹⁴ Going further, Jesus informed his closest disciples that “he that hath seen me hath seen the Father.”¹⁵

Now, we will let those with greater and more inspired minds than mine grapple over the nature of the Trinity, or the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are told that they are one, at the very least “in purpose.” Undoubtedly, their oneness, or at-one-ment, connectedness, extends well beyond anything we can imagine. It certainly includes character.

In my limited encounters with Deity, he has not told me that he was functioning as part of a triune God, or as one of three separate and distinct Beings, suggesting, perhaps, that such distinctions are not meaningful in our relationship with him. But Jesus has shared with me his atonement. Through these encounters, I have learned a little something about his feelings of connectedness with me. I have experienced the atonement of God; the connectedness of God. I cannot begin to express my wonder. No, “I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.”¹⁶

Whatever one decides about the Godhead or the divinity of Jesus Christ, this much seems clear: Jesus believed that God, the Father sent him to earth. He believed that his Father spoke

¹² I said it is “baffling” because Jesus, like Israel’s manna, is beyond comprehension. I discuss this in a homily entitled, “The Hidden Manna,” with its text, Deuteronomy 8.³.

¹³ Colossians 2.⁹

¹⁴ John 5.¹⁹

¹⁵ John 14.⁹

¹⁶ Alma 26.¹⁶

and acted through him. He believed that Father spoke and acted through him not simply to reprove and improve a darkened world, but, more fundamentally, to reveal Himself. As John testifies, “the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared [introduced, revealed] him.”¹⁷

Thus, we are to see and comprehend God, Father, in every word Jesus spoke and in every act Jesus performed. This is how Jesus “declared” His “name,” or character. In every moment of his life, from the manger to the cross to the grave, Jesus entered into and formed connections. In each, he was revealing something about Father—Father’s connectedness with humankind, at-one-ment. “Father is,” Jesus said with every breath, “a connected Being, just like me.” This revelation continues to his final breath, taken atop the cross. “Look,” says Jesus from his uplifted position at Calvary. “Look! Look upon Father. You should see Father up here, right now, suffering.”

This is how I put it. Had Father been in Jerusalem during that Passover week, He would have done just as Jesus did. Had He been there on that Friday, good for all of us, but brutal for Jesus, Father would have been up on that cross. This is what God’s do—whether Fathers, Sons, or Spirits. This is who God’s are. This is what those must be who would presume to “become gods and goddesses.”

Thus, while scripture can rightfully speak of “the atonement of Jesus Christ,” we can and should, justifiably, speak of “the atonement of God,” and “the atonement of God, the Father.” This was Jesus’ revelation. This is what Jesus revealed when he “declared [God’s] name.” Atonement, connectedness belongs every bit as much to the Father as it does to the Son. And it comes to Father, as it does to the Son, naturally, by disposition, not by expiation or payment. It existed in Father’s heart before Jesus live, suffered, and died on this planet, and it will exist forever.

¹⁷ John 1.¹⁸

We have now completed two homilies on atonement and are nearing the end of the third. The reader may be getting a little antsy, noting that we have said very little about things that are, traditionally, considered to be at the heart of atonement and its meaning. We have said little, for example, about resurrection or the forgiveness of sin. How, the reader may ask, is this silence possible?

We will, of course, get to such topics—in fact, in just another minute or so. We will cover them in our atonement titles such as, “Justification: How we Repent and Change,” and, “Renewal: The Hope, Joy, Peace, and Power of Atonement.” Such titles point to the consequences and benefits that accrue to us because of atonement, because of Deity’s connectedness with us. But, addressing the benefits that atonement brings to us does not, in my mind, speak directly to and of atonement itself. You see, if you haven’t already figured it out, “atonement” isn’t, for me, so much about Divine actions—what Jesus did (and what Father did through Jesus)—as it is about Divine character and disposition: what Jesus IS, and, thus, what Father IS.

By way of analogy, we can think of it like this. Suppose you asked me to tell you about my wife, Estelle. What’s she like? And suppose that I proceeded to tell you all the benefits I enjoy because of our relationship. Certainly, you would know that I benefit through my relationship with her as husband. But, would you, unrelated to Estelle, be benefited too? You can’t say. You still don’t really know who Estelle might be in relation to you. You don’t really know all that much about her character.

You see, in describing the benefits that come to me through her and my relationship with her, I have only revealed Estelle to you indirectly. If, on the other hand, I spoke of her directly—she is this (kind, generous, loyal) and she is that (accepting, nonjudgmental, etc.), perhaps with examples—then you might have a better sense of who Estelle is and what you could expect of and from her.

So, in our homilies so far we have spoken little of the consequences of atonement. We have,

instead, been focused on the revealed Divine character trait: atonement, connectedness. Notwithstanding scripture's metaphors of atonement, this character trait, as we have said repeatedly, was not "brought about," "invented" "created," or "purchased" through divine activity—either through Jesus' lifelong ministry, or his final twenty-four hours of suffering, or his unimagined resurrection, or his glorious ascension into heaven. Atonement is not "retroactive" from such events. Rather it existed long before all these events. It existed in the heart of Deity long before the world came into being and will exist as long as Father and Son exist, for they cannot be who they are; cannot be "God" without at-one-ment.

So, again, the incalculable blessings of justification, sanctification, resurrection, etc. are products, benefits of atonement. However unspeakably grand they are, they are not atonement itself.

With this clarification, we can return to Hebrews.

the subjugation of sin and death

Having established Jesus' connectedness to us as revealed through his coming to earth and becoming one of us—atonement as revealed through condescension, and incarnation—the writer of Hebrews does turn his attention to benefits that flow through that atonement. He focuses on just two. But, Oh, how very big they are.

You will recall that after his discussion of Jesus' superiority over prophets and angels, the Book's author turned to the question of humankind. "What is man?" In relation to this earth's created order, Deity had "put all things in subjection under his feet." However, the author seems to suggest that humankind still has more to subjugate. "But now we see not yet all things put under him."

Hebrews identifies that "more" to be put under subjugation as sin and death. Jesus subjugated both in his own life. And through him, humankind, too, can find sin and death subjugated in their lives.

We focus our attention, first, and the last enemy to be subjugated: death.

“Through death he [Jesus] might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.”

While it is clear that Jesus is the agent of our deliverance from the bondage that death exacts, the exact mechanism is a mystery. It is unknown and for the present unknowable. How, we wonder first, can God even die? Surely, he need not subject himself to it. So, his dying must be a willful, entirely voluntary act of choice—essentially suicide. And, having done the unthinkable, die, how exactly, does this God accomplish his own resurrection from the grasping oblivion of that “awful monster; yea that monster, death and hell”?¹⁸

Scripture will never quite explain all of this. How could it?! But the Book of Acts will say perhaps the only thing that *can* be said, and that over and over again: that “God [Father] hath raised up [Jesus], having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.”¹⁹

So, that’s number one. Through Jesus and his connectedness with us, human death is subjugated. Death is subjugated through the death of God. Death is subjugated through the resurrection of God. This can’t and won’t be verified through any kind of earthly experience or experiment. We are offered no hard evidence of it. We must simply trust scripture’s witness that God died and God was resurrected, and that that God’s resurrection can and will, somehow, be applied to each of us.

We say that there is no evidence for this assertion of our resurrection, and we will stick by that. However, according to Hebrews’ witness, death is not the only thing that Jesus subjugates. He also subjugates temptation/the trial of sin and sin itself. And because one can experience and experiment upon this assertion, it can serve as a small evidence of the greater

¹⁸ See 2 Nephi 9.¹⁰

¹⁹ Acts 2.²⁴. See also 3.^{15, 26}; 5.³⁰; 10.⁴⁰; 13.^{30, 33, 37}; 17.³¹

subjugation of death. Here, then, is the second thing Jesus subjugates and that we subjugate through our association, our connectedness with him.

“Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.

In coming to earth and thereby becoming one with us, Jesus, God himself, experienced temptation and trial. But he overcame or subjugated every temptation and trial in his sinless life. By his experience, and through his successes he is able to counsel and “succour” us. “This is how,” he instructs us, “I handled this temptation and that trial when I was with you and experienced it myself.” “Let me share with you my knowledge of sin and my power to subjugate it.” With time, and through our being “yoked” with Christ, who alone is “able,” we too learn to subjugate every temptation and every trial. How very important it is, then, that we follow the admonition of Hebrew’s writer and “come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace²⁰ to help in time of need.”²¹

The Apostle Paul seconds this truth in his letter to the Corinthians.

“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

But Jesus’ “succour” extends beyond his assistance in helping us resist and endure temptation and testing. Nothing seems any surer than that we “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”²² So, as Jesus teaches, counsels, and tutors us, we will, being flawed students, err, for this subjugation of temptation and sin requires long and difficult practice. What can Jesus do about these inevitable failures along the way? In answer to this question,

²⁰ Remember, this grace is not “enabling” power. It is his acceptance and attachment to us. It is the experience of this at-one-ment that brings the enablement.

²¹ Hebrews 4.¹⁶

²² Romans 3.²³

Hebrews' author says that Jesus makes "reconciliation for the sins of the people."

"Reconciliation." We will not, here, address this word, what it means, and what it doesn't mean in full.²³ We will pick away at it over the course of our homilies. But, we will make a few introductory remarks and assertions. These, we will build upon as we go.

The Greeks did not believe, it seems, that their gods were naturally good-willed toward and connected to them. Thus, the Greeks were under necessity of constantly paying off, bribing, really, the recalcitrant gods in hopes of winning their favor and gaining some benefit from them. This was most often accomplished through sacrifice. One of the words the Greeks used for this transaction was *hilaskomai*. *Hilaskomai* is the Greek word that ends up being translated, not entirely accurately, as "reconciliation" in the King James Bible's Hebrews 2.¹⁷

Unfortunately, in adopting this Greek vocabulary item, *hilaskomai*, many seemed to have adopted the false Greek theology along with it. They assumed that their God would not, could not feel connected to them unless he was fed, bought off with a sacrifice. Jesus became, then, to some, the sacrificial lamb, payment, bribery to a disconnected God in hopes of satisfying him and coaxing him back into connectedness²⁴— the "lamb of God" who "belonged" to and died at the demand of Father" rather than "the lamb who was, himself, God."

Now, let us be as clear as possible. This is at the very heart of my "theory of atonement" and central to Jesus' revelation of his Father. The belief, adopted from false Greek theology, that Heavenly Father does not possess, naturally, as part of His disposition, feelings of good-will and connectedness with humankind is false. It is a false doctrine and a form of human bondage to believe that the Father must be bought off to feel and be connected to us. It is a false doctrine that Jesus "paid the price," Father's price, so that Father would and could feel and act upon feelings of at-one-ment, connectedness with humanity. It is just this very lie that

²³ We discuss it in our "Prolegomena: The Vocabulary of Atonement"

²⁴ There are numerous reasons that this does not work. We will explore them from time to time over the course of our homilies.

Jesus came to correct, to demolish, and to scatter into oblivion.

We have before quoted John 1.¹⁸.

“No man hath seen God at any time: the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.”

Two points. First, forget about the silly debate concerning the literal “seeing of God,” in which “traditional” Christians and “LDS Christians” have engaged. “Joseph ‘saw’ God,” says the Mormon Christian. “No, he didn’t,” responds the traditional Christian, “because no man can see God.” Whether one “sets eyes upon” God or not, is not John’s point.

“No one has ever *understood* Deity.” That is the point: Deity is the most misunderstood of all beings. That this is John’s point becomes clear as he proceeds. This is our second point. Jesus “hath declared him.” Jesus has made his Father known. Jesus is the Father’s (and his, as well) most powerful introduction of Deity to an uneducated and undiscerning humanity.

Now, think about this for a moment. We will use my wife, again, as an example. Suppose that upon Estelle’s walking into a room, I turn to you and say, “Let me introduce you to my wife, Estelle.” But suppose you are already well acquainted with her? You might wonder why I feel the need to “introduce” her. You see, we only *introduce* (lead inside) people who are unknown or poorly known.

Father, Jesus felt, had not been properly introduced to humankind. Jesus came to make that introduction. In making that introduction, Jesus used the most effective teaching tool in the toolbox: example, object lesson. Jesus, God himself, acted out God, the Father. Jesus, God himself, as we have said repeatedly, demonstrated and formed divine connectedness in every human encounter, with every word of instruction, with every act of compassion.

So, what do we do with the Greek, *hilaskomai*? Though it carries inherent dangers of misunderstanding and misapplication, I am O.K. thinking of Jesus as a kind of sacrifice. However, we must clearly understand that it is a *self*-sacrifice... of God. He sacrifices

himself not to appease Father, but to reveal a Heavenly Father who needs no appeasement. Rather than “sacrifice” another, as humans are wont to do, God sacrifices himself. Rather than bringing suffering to others, as humans are wont to do, God himself suffers the agony of the cross Himself. In all this suffering and sacrificing, Jesus is not “buying” Father’s goodwill. He is not reconnecting a disconnected God. If anyone is being bought, it is humankind. He is buying humankind and reconnecting disconnected human beings. We will come back to this over and over. Hopefully, as we say it often and in new and different ways, it will become clear how it works.

We can really say very little more about the exact mechanism behind the wonder behind the subjugation of temptation and sin in the human life. But, it might look something like this.

We will feel, at times, that sin has subjugated us. Like Adam and Eve, we will lose sight of Deity’s commitment to us. His connectedness. We will feel that Deity has detached himself, disconnected from us. We will hide behind a bush from him. We might “repent” and so feel that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have reattached to us. But we will sin again, and Deity will, by this logic, once more detach himself. One is not sure who to feel sorrier for, the human being or Deity jerked about as he is by individuals’ sins: attaching, detaching, reattaching, re-detaching, re-reattaching. My goodness, what a fickle, subjugated god such doctrine creates!

But this false doctrine of at-one-ment is more than comic. It is demeaning to the Father. It is demeaning to the Son. It is demeaning to the Holy Spirit. And, for us, it is downright life-threatening. It leaves us dangerously vulnerable to temptation and sin; for we can only subjugate temptation and sin through our connectedness to and with Deity. It is only through Jesus’ revelation of Father’s unrelenting and unconditional connectedness that we subjugate temptation, the trial of temptation, and sin so as to, finally, become what we must be to exist in the cosmos that exists beyond the bounds of this earth’s time and space. What kind of god detaches just at the moment of greatest need?

My “theory of atonement,” is far more than a “moral theory,” however. It is far more than a merely “psychological” band-aid. We must... I repeat, we must *become*. Our eternal existence depends not so much on what we do as on what we are. To become what we must

be, it is mandatory that we remain connected to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Though in my theory of atonement Deity never ever disconnects from us and so is ever available to “succour” us, we can disconnect from him by believing he disconnects from us. This leaves us vulnerable, as we have said, and thus hampers our advancement toward being, diminishes our eternal character, and will bear the unfortunate result of reducing the joy and power and progress of our eternal existence.

If, then, we find scripture’s witness to be true—that Jesus can perform the wonder of subjugating temptation and sin while we live here in this time-bound place—we grow more confident in the possibility of resurrection and continued existence beyond the grave.

Conclusion

Well, we’ve covered a good deal of ground in this homily. It turned out longer than I had intended. If you are still with me, congrats. Perhaps I will try my hand at a seven-minute sermon on this same text.

Anyway, the writer of Hebrews has one clear over-riding objective in writing his Book. That objective is to demonstrate, prove, convince that Jesus of Nazareth, with his earthly ministry and his heavenly ministry from the right hand of God, is superior to any other being with their ministries—prophet, priest, king, angel, etc. It is almost at the dead center of his Book that he summarizes the point of his work:

“But now hath he [Jesus] obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises.”²⁵

For this reason, we can place unqualified faith in him.

His superiority over all others can be ascribed to his character. He is like God. He is God. But, what is more, this God is attached to and feels connectedness with frail humanity. To

²⁵ Hebrews 8.⁶

prove these feelings of unity, at-one-ment, with humanity, He came to earth. He became one of us. “Not reluctant to call them brethren,” and because they were “partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same” and was “made like unto his brethren” in order to “declare” the “name of God “unto [his] brethren.” “The God whom you call Father,” Jesus declared, “feels the same about you as I. He sent me here to prove it, to demonstrate His connectedness.

This demonstration of divine connectedness was not simply an exercise in consciousness and a lesson in theology. It carries with it direct consequences. Through Jesus’ condescension and incarnation, and as a consequence of his connectedness with us, we can find the wherewithal to subjugate temptation, the trial of temptation, and even sin itself. What’s more, through Jesus, we find that most monstrous of all powers, death and hell, subjugated, its threat and bondage ended as surely as Yahweh ended ancient Israel’s bondage in Egypt.

We honor Jesus, then, as something more than priest or prophet or messenger. We honor him as God, yes. But, as he has taught us, we honor him most when we call him friend and brother, forever at-one with us, forever and unalterably connected to us.

“Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”