

The Atonement in Linear Time

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Sept 2005

Not long ago I was asked to speak in sacrament meeting. The assigned subject was “come unto Christ,” and I used the occasion to bear my testimony. As so often happens when one is asked to bring ideas into focus, I learned some fun things while I was preparing the talk.

As I began to think about the atonement I asked a question I had not asked before: “What physical---meaning, time and space, as well as world and body---what physical environment must have been provided for us in order that the atonement would work.”

The time-tested system proved effectual again: If one asks the right questions in the right order the questions themselves provide the magic key.

Once I knew the question, the answers came readily. The answers were not new in any particular, but they created a new panorama for me as I put them together into a single unit.

I realized something I had not thought of before: It is only by virtue of the Saviour’s atonement that we find ourselves in this kind of physical environment that enables us to accept the cleansing power of the atonement.

It seems to me that there are at least seven necessary conditions that must be met by our “physical” experience, in order for us to be free to take advantage of all the blessings of the atonement. By identifying those seven, I believe I came closer to understanding the magnitude of the atonement than I had come before. (Im sure there are more than 7, but this is a good start.)

They are these:

(1) In this world, we must forget. We must not be able to bring any memory of our previous existence with us to this world. If we were to do so, that memory would impose itself upon our purposes, motives, and actions, and we could not be free here to make independent decisions. So, in order for us to have free agency here in this world, we had to come innocent, and without memory of our previous life. (I suspect, if our pre-earth spirit world experience required the same kind of free agency, one also had to enter that world innocent, and having forgotten the experiences one had as an intelligence.)

(2) In this world, we have to be in linear time. In linear time one can experience only the moment of the present, and can neither return to that moment after it has passed, nor carry it into the future. Sacred time is very different from that. When one is in sacred time, one does not have the restraints of “before” and “after.” Sacred time is time through which one can move in somewhat the same way we move through space. There is a relationship between sacred and linear time. That is, those in sacred time can move through past, present, future, and back again in linear time. Therefore, when one is in sacred time, one can know both causes and consequences of events that occur in linear time. That is why God and the members of the Council in Heaven were able to plan so perfectly. They were in sacred time and could understand everything that would occur in linear time.

The purposes of our present world would be defeated if we were in sacred time.

One reason that our experience here must be in linear time is the same as the reason we must lose our memory: that is, if one could move through time to go back and fix things, or go forward to know which problems to avoid, it would preclude independent thinking in this world and thus would prevent our having free agency.

(3) (I don't know quite how to say this so it will make sense, so please be patient while I try to muddle through.) In this world, we are in a strange kind of reality, that isn't quite real. It is not dream-like, because it is very real, but neither is it an absolute, straightforward reality. Let me try to explain.

If our situation were absolute reality, we would be fully punished whenever we sinned, and fully blessed whenever we did something good. That is not, and must not be the case. If we were fully punished when we sinned two things would happen. One is that our Self would diminish because of the punishment. For example, if one hurts another because of hatred or envy, there are two sins involved. The first is the motive, the second the action. I suspect that in many cases the motive is the greater sin than action. The punishment for hatred would be, I suppose, an exposure of one's cankered soul to one's Self, sealing it in reality. In the world we now live in one can avoid that through repentance, but if time for repentance were not given, the exposure would occur in the intensity of the hatred one's soul would be diminished. So each time one sinned, one would get closer and closer to hell, with no possible way to get out. The second is that if we anticipated the immediate punishment we would avoid the sin, which would have the same effect as being forced to not do evil. As a result, we might be saved, but the salvation would be meaningless because it would have been without free agency.

On the other hand, if we were blessed each time we did something good, we would be bribed or forced into heaven, and again, without our free agency.

So one of the conditions we must find ourselves in is this kind of unreal suspension is that one may taste the consequence of sin, but not fully experience it. Also, one may taste the consequence of doing good, but not fully experience that either. Having tasted the partial effects of good and evil, then one is free, not to return to it, but to try to duplicate or enhance it next time. Let me give you a simple example: one of the first things a toddler learns is that there is advantage in cheating. If another toddler is looking away, he can take her toys without getting into a fight. The child is innocent so that is not a sin, but it is a learning experience. When the child matures, one of three things will come from his repetition of that experience. (1) The adult will embrace its advantage and base his whole political or economic career on that principle of cheating. (2) Or, the adult may resort to it only on occasion, when it seems especially advantageous or necessary. (3) Or, as an adult, one may have discovered that cheating is repugnant to one's soul, and simply refuse to do it because it is bitter to one's taste, and therefore, because one chooses not to cheat.

The same principle works for the kinds of actions and attitudes that the prophets have defined as evil. Example:

A toddler responds to another's sorrow, pain, or misfortune with kindness, but as an adult that child may be kind only on occasion when it seems necessary or self-advantageous; or he may avoid feelings of empathy and kindness altogether, seeing them as evidence of weakness---as demeaning---violating one's sense of strength and superiority, and therefore behave with contempt toward other people.

In each example, the persons began at the same place, but their choices ultimately defined their Selves to themselves and to God quite differently.

So it is with everything one does, and every decision one makes. Because we are in linear time, and in a state of suspension where we do not receive the full consequences of our actions, we are free to be ourselves. This is a perfect environment in which one may answer the question: When you were in the spirit world, why did you obey: was it because you recognized obedience would bring power and authority, or was it because you loved your Father and His children.

The reason this earth life is a perfect environment for one honestly answer those questions is because one cannot remember what pre-mortal advantages he sought after, so in this world one seeks after the things that brings the greatest gratification ---whether that gratification comes from doing good, or doing evil.

There is a problem: Frequently, in this world, one's environment gets in the way of one's having the freedom to be oneself. That also has been taken into account. If some environmental or cultural circumstances imposed unnatural attitudes upon one in this life, then in the post-life spirit world one can rethink and redefine one's Self, rejecting the things that are not compatible with one's true desires; or continue as one did here, moving in the same direction and defining one's Self with even greater clarity.

Abrogation

(4) In this world, one must have a way to tell the difference between good and bad. We come equipped with that. It is one's conscience. The problem with one's conscience is that it is conditioned by one's culture. For example, in some cultures telling a lie is the norm, in others it is a very bad thing to do. One's conscience accepts what one's culture dictates. So the value of its truthfulness is relative to the culture one grows up in. Another, more severe example: During the dark ages, when Augustine set out to standardize penances for sin, he created a catalog that rated the seriousness of different sins. In his catalog, premarital sex was not as bad, and required a less severe penance than self stimulation. So in the culture he influenced, premarital sex was considered the lesser evil, and therefore an acceptable behavior—and in that particular, individual consciences were stifled. The more frequently that sort of abrogation of correct principles occurs in a society, the easier it is for more to be added. Eventually, that which is good is called evil and that which is evil is called good. Then, not only does the culture fall in to decay, but individual consciences do not know how to respond.

Because one's conscience is conditioned by one's culture, all the problems associated with its inaccuracies in this life will have to be sorted out in our post-life spirit world. That's why we do baptism and temple ordinances for the dead---so it can be sorted out with perfect fairness.

(5) In this world's environment of linear time, each individual walks alone and in relative darkness. For one to have absolute free agency, there must be a way provided for one to penetrate that darkness and develop relationships with other people and with God. The Holy Ghost provides that way. It seals families and friendships, and creates a quality of love that cannot otherwise be known. The Holy Ghost works with people on two different principles.

In order to insure that every person has a full opportunity to fulfill the assignments given him in the Council in Heaven, every individual must have access to the blessings of the Holy Ghost---at least enough access to be taught on an as-needed basis, the things that he must do. One of the most striking examples of that is Nephi's prophecy of Columbus: "...and I beheld the Spirit of God, that it came down and wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land." (1 Ne. 13:12b)

However, in the end, that is not enough. For there must be a consistent and predictable way for one to have access to light and truth---there must be the Gift of the Holy Ghost to teach one how to know truth, and how to fulfil one's pre-mortal covenants. In order for one to be saved in the Kingdom of God, one must learn to respond to the teachings and instructions from the Holy Ghost---if not in this world, then in the next.

6) Our being in this world must not be permanent---there must be a way to get out of here. For the overwhelming majority of us that way is death. Death is one of the greatest blessings of the atonement. It enables us to leave behind in this world everything that is not essential for our continued growth in the spirit world. Death is different from the transition stages we have experienced in the past. In those, innocence and loss of memory guaranteed that one's free agency would not be infringed upon when we came into a new world. However, as far as I can tell, when we die here, our personalities and memories remain intact, and the circumstances that gave us agency in this world are continued in the next. Consequently, by the time one has passed through this world and also the next in the spirit world, one has had sufficient time and experience to thoroughly define one's Self.

7) The final step is the completion of one's creation process. It is when one receives a fully functional, resurrected body that is perfectly compatible with one's spiritual Self. That is the key: we will receive a resurrected body whose glory is the same as the glory of our spirit in this life. Our resurrected body will not be a kind of a reward or a punishment, but it will just be what it is supposed to be---be a natural product of the kind of person we have chosen to become. The Lord explained to the Prophet Joseph:

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.
 27 For notwithstanding they die, they also shall rise again, a spiritual [resurrected] body.
 28 They who are [present tense] of a celestial spirit shall receive [future tense] the same body which was a natural body; even ye shall receive [future tense] your bodies, and your

glory shall be [future tense] that glory by which your bodies are quickened [present tense].

29 Ye who are [present tense---now] quickened by a portion of the celestial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness.

30 And they who are [present tense---now] quickened by a portion of the terrestrial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness.

31 And also they who are [present tense---now] 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 88:29-32)

And thus, with the resurrection, our the creation process will have become complete, and those who, through the blessings of the atonement, have become like God, will be with God forever and ever.

If that analysis is correct, it is also correct that the entire process—at every stage and in every environment—is a gift and blessing of the Saviour's love.