

THE ATONEMENT: GETHSEMANE VERSUS CALVARY

Doctrine and Covenants 19:18

By Raymond White

Occasionally (though not often thankfully) a trendy sort of “grass roots” doctrine takes hold and becomes fashionable. And while such notions are not quite “false doctrine,” they might at least be categorized (in my view) as “skewed understanding” or “exaggerated interpretation.”

Most of such notions come and go quickly, annihilating themselves almost on arrival. But one “skewed understanding” (I’m trying to be gracious about this) has gained legs and persists, and I think it’s time I gave my opposing opinion simply because I want to. And if you conclude that mine is the false doctrine, then so be it. Everyone has the right to an opinion and to express that opinion, so says the first amendment of the constitution which Mormons believe is inspired.

From my conversations with many of my fellow saints over the years (actually decades), I believe that roughly a third of Mormons believe this particular “skewed understanding” to be true doctrine, about a third reject it, and about a third are unaware that it’s an issue and respond simply with: “huh?”

The “skewed understanding” that I’m alluding to is probably best called “Gethsemane Atonement” and is understood by its advocates to mean that the atonement of Christ happened not on Calvary’s cross but in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus bled from every pore.

Well, I, and many other Mormons simply do not believe that. Further, I, and others, believe that the notion of Gethsemane Atonement is simply not true and has no scriptural basis whatsoever, and I believe it is time to take this on and offer my opposing point of view.

[1] GETHSEMANE VERSES

And so (sigh) here goes. At great personal risk (I know I’ll draw fire), I’ll start with the critical verse where the notion of Gethsemane Atonement is thought to have its roots but doesn’t.

Doctrine and Covenants 19:18 Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit — and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink —

The thinking is that if the Lord bled at every pore, surely that must have been a greater suffering than the crucifixion and therefore must have been the true atonement. I’ll not quarrel with the first idea, that his Gethsemane suffering was worse than his crucifixion. But the second idea, that his Gethsemane suffering was therefore the real atonement, simply does not follow.

Here’s the question: Was this great suffering of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane in fact the atonement, or even *an* atonement? If it was, you’d think this verse might say so, wouldn’t you? It doesn’t. Please look, read the text carefully, and see if you can find the word “atonement” or any of its synonyms — reconcile, justified, redeemed, forgiven — in this verse. Hum. Can’t find any such words, can you? That’s because they’re not there. So why this quantum leap of faith to a “doctrine” that the scriptures simply do not say? That’s a rhetorical question and I won’t offer an answer.

But let’s read the text carefully to see what the text *does* say. These words, “would that I might not”, jump out at us as strikingly important. Just what does “would that I might not”

mean? The entire clause is future conditional and means “I don’t want to have to go through it.” They do not mean “I don’t like what’s happening now,” but instead mean, “I don’t like what’s *about* to happen.” Well, if Jesus is in the garden bleeding for the sins of the world, what future event could possibly be the subject of his fear? That’s a no-brainer. The cross, of course.

There are two other verses that talk about the Gethsemane event. And it makes sense to ask the question again: does the word atonement or any of its synonyms appear in *those* verses? Well, let’s take a look. Here are the verses —

Mosiah 3:7 *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 people.*

Luke 22:44 *And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was at it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.*

Neither of these verses speak of payment for sin although Mosiah does speak of suffering for sins. But suffering and payment are two entirely different things as anyone who has ever agonized over an unpaid bill knows. Agonizing over a debt and paying the debt are two entirely different things. “So great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and abominations...” is pain for a debt, not payment for that debt. Suffering grief for a debt does not get the debt paid. Paying the debt gets the debt paid. To presume that Jesus paid for our sins in Gethsemane without any scriptural basis, none at all, is to presume a lot. Creating doctrine out of thin air is dangerous stuff, and especially when it touches on this most important of all gospel subjects: the atonement of Jesus Christ.

[2] CALVARY VERSES IN MORMON SCRIPTURES

Now that you see what the scriptures do *not* say, let’s consider what the scriptures *do* say. There’s a long list.

1 Nephi 11:33 *And I, Nephi, saw that he was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world.* Now that’s atonement. Is there anything about “slain” and “sins” that is unclear?

2 Nephi 9:5 *...it behooveth the great Creator that he suffereth himself to become subject unto man in the flesh, and die for all men...*

Mosiah 3:11 *For behold, and also his blood atoneth for the sins of those who have fallen...* One might infer that this “blood” is referring to his Gethsemane blood. But that would be a stretch and is clearly not the intent. What is in view is the blood of an executed criminal.

Alma 30:26 *...he shall be slain for the sins of the world—*

Alma 33:22 ...he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins... Is there anything about “die” and “atone” that is unclear?

Helaman 14:15 For behold, he surely must die that salvation may come... How can anyone imagine there was an atonement before the cross? How can that possibly be true when his dying was *the* essential act required for salvation?

3 Nephi 11:14 ...I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world.

D&C 18:11 For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him.

D&C 35:2 ... crucified for the sins of the world... \

D&C 46:13 ...crucified for the sins of the world. | Monotonous, isn't it? How

D&C 53:2 ...crucified for the sins of the world... | can we believe anything else?

D&C 54:1 ...crucified for the sins of the world— /

Okay, that pretty much wraps up the Mormon scriptures that pertain to this subject.

[3] CALVARY VERSES IN THE BIBLE

Now to the Bible verses. I offered the Mormon verses first lest anyone object to my Bible verses saying something like: “Hey! Those are Bible verses. Maybe they’re mistranslated.” I hate that. There are mistakes in the King James Version, that is true, but not in these critical verses that are the heart of the matter.

Romans 5:10 For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son...

You must understand that “reconciled” and “atoned” are two translations of the same Greek word. They are not merely two words with the same meaning, they are the same word, katallasso, or if you care, καταλλάσσω. So, what caused the atonement? The death of his son.

1 Corinthians 1:18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us where are saved it is the power of God.

It is impossible to overstate the grandness of this verse. To people who are damned, the cross is foolishness. To people who are saved, it is God’s power. I’ve heard people in church ridicule the cross as merely a torture device. But that’s the point. It is the symbol of God’s love because that is what Christ was willing to endure for us, and also his power because he defeated it.

Actually, there is a mistranslation in this verse but it’s not pertinent to the subject. Still, to be thorough, the offending words here are “are saved” in the present perfect tense. The Greek sozo, σώζω, is present progressive and should be translated “being saved” which is how it

appears in many modern translations. But don't jump to conclusions. The present perfect tense "are saved" does appear elsewhere in the New Testament. But back to the subject.

2 Corinthians 5:21 For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin...

[4] GETHSEMANE — WHAT HAPPENED THERE?

Now we're getting back to the original question but from a different angle. If the atonement did not happen in Gethsemane, what *did* happen in Gethsemane? Let's read that first Book of Mormon verse again —

Mosiah 3:7 ...for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people.

What exactly is he saying? Christ is not suffering here in Gethsemane to pay for our sins, he is suffering the sins themselves! And that's the critical difference. Now, you may argue that suffering "the sins" was a greater pain than suffering the payment for sins and we'll have no quarrel. Which was the greater pain is not the issue. Here's the issue: In Gethsemane he *took* our sins like a man signing for someone else's debt and he *became* sin. Then at Calvary he *paid* for those sins and that's where he left them, on his cross.

Now we can untangle this challenging verse —

Alma 34:11 Now there is not any man that can sacrifice his own blood which will atone for the sins of another.

What? Christ can't pay for *your* sins? Exactly so. They had to first become *his* sins. That's the magnificent point. They were our sins, but he *took* them and made them his own, then he paid for them which only he could do because he was sinless..

Onward.

Colossians 2:14 Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.

Let's go through this verse carefully. What is the "handwriting of ordinances that was against us"? The ordinances is the law. The handwriting is the written law that we cannot refute. It says what it says. It is "against us" because we broke it and stand condemned. But Christ eliminated its condemnation by "nailing it to his cross," as if to say, "Here's the broken law and here's the payment."

Have you ever nailed a bulletin on a wall for everyone to see? That's the idea here. The law, its demands, our failure, our condemnation, and his payment are hanging on his cross for all the world, and angels, and demons, to see, so that no one can argue. A bulletin to the universe, "paid in full." It's done.

To finally dispel any notion of the atonement happening anywhere other than Calvary's Cross, I have one more verse —

1 Peter 2:24 Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.

If our sins were paid for in Gethsemane, then what in the world did he take to the cross if our sins were already taken care of? There'd be nothing left *to* take! Do you get it yet? But he didn't take nothing, he took something, our sins, to his cross, nailed them there, and that's where they remain today and forever.

Every verse that speaks of atonement has this single message: Christ's death on the cross paid for and atoned for our sins. That payment did not occur anywhere else.

So that leaves us with this question: what exactly did happen in Gethsemane? Bruce McConkie, I think, said it best in his Doctrinal New Testament Commentary, volume 1, page 776: "The saviour took upon himself the burden of the sins of mankind." That, I believe, is exactly what happened. In the garden, he came face to face with all the sins of the human race and somehow transferred them all onto himself. He "took" the debt and assigned it to himself. And when he left the garden, they were his do dispose of on the cross. In the garden, he took them, and on the cross, he unloaded them. Taking them was transference, not atonement. Unloading them was atonement.

And what about between the garden and the cross? Well, there is this —

Isaiah 53:5 ...with his stripes we were healed.

His torture in the garden, his torture on the cross, and all his torture in between, all worked to our salvation. What a magnificent, infinitely powerful love he had for us. How can we do anything but love him back?

[5] THE IRON ROD

I think there is not much left to say. I've made the case and what it means to you is now up to you. Perhaps there is one last thing to say and that is how important it is to let the scriptures speak for themselves without trying to make them say something different than what they do say. So, with that in mind, I'll leave you with these —

1 Nephi 15:23 And they said unto me: what meaneth the rod of iron...? :24 And I said unto them that it was the word of God...

There's a reason the iron rod is not a rubber rod.

2 Peter 3:16 ...which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest [twist] as they do also the other scriptures unto their own destruction.