

## Understanding the Atonement

(Drop the scriptures on the pulpit, pick them up and drop them again)

Gravity: we all understand it well and apply our knowledge of it everyday--like sitting down on a chair. NASA uses it to sling shot space probes around the sun and planets. **The effect of gravity is always completely predictable.**

We are subject to the effects of gravity all the time, it is extremely useful---our lives actually depend on it, **BUT---no one fully understands or has proven how it works.** What passes through the ether of space to keep the earth in orbit around the sun? Without gravitational attraction, planets would hurl off into frozen space. But how does the mass of the earth even know the sun is there? No physical connection has yet been observed or measured.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ is like gravity. It affects us all; it is absolutely necessary for our Eternal lives, BUT we don't really understand how it was accomplished. No mortal, even the most righteous, can reproduce the atonement for his own sins---and certainly not for others.

We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel. (Pearl of Great Price | Articles of Faith 1:3)

In Sunday School this month, as we begin a year of lessons from the Old Testament, you have probably discussed what we call the pre-mortal war in heaven. Each spirit, including you and me, exercised agency and made a choice between two opposing plans. The fact that we are here, as mortals on the earth, means that we choose the plan presented by Jesus Christ.

In my mortal reasoning, I believe that to choose Christ's plan, we needed to believe two critical things. First, the atonement would work and thereby provide a way for us to return to our spiritual parents. And, second, we would need to believe that Jesus could and would accomplish the atonement. The third Article of Faith was part of our pre-existence. There were likely other factors in our decision, but these two seem necessary.

*(Some might question why really bad guys like Stalin, Hitler, or Saddam Hussein are here on earth with us---I don't know for sure, but if they intended to be really bad, they likewise would choose the plan with agency. Under Satan's plan they would not be allowed to behave the way they wanted.)*

Now let me share some experiences from our mission in West Africa that have helped me to better understand and appreciate the almost incomprehensibly precious gift of the atonement.

Sister Markham has mentioned our first visit to Budaburam Branch in the Liberian refugee camp outside Accra, Ghana. This place would make any scout camp or YW camp you ever attended look like a five star Hilton. When we first visited, there were no LDS missionaries working in the branch. The members had joined the Church in their home land of Liberia and then fled a decade-long, brutal civil war to live in total poverty as refugees in Ghana. They had lost all their

worldly processions to the war and in most cases lost members of their immediate families. Worst of all, they had no real opportunities to work themselves out of this hole. Ghana has high unemployment. No refugees are not allowed to hold jobs. They can't afford school. They barely survive on the food and water supplied by foreign aid to the camp.

Church was held in two rented rooms of a schoolhouse. The building was concrete block construction with a corrugated tin roof. No lights, no ventilation and only children's two pupil desks to sit in. Primary and RS got the two rooms during the first hour, so Priesthood met outside under the trees with goats and chickens wandering around us. But we had light from the sun and some breeze to moderate the 80 F and 80% humidity. The Elder's Quorum instructor was a young returned missionary. He taught well from the Joseph F. Smith manual. If I had closed my eyes (and nose), I might have thought I was in a Utah County ward.

Sister Markham has mentioned Sunday School.

As the 130+ in attendance crowded into the larger room for sacrament meeting, the branch president mercifully asked me to give the opening prayer and Sister Markham to give the benediction so we could sit on the folding chairs at the front of the room facing the congregation. The open doorways provided some light and an occasional breeze, though sometimes the breeze seemed to be produced only by insect wings! Three adults sat in each two pupil desk in the congregation.

I struggled through a short prayer as my emotions were overflowing with thoughts of all the stuff and opportunity I have had all my life versus the perceived misery I was surrounded by.

It was fast and testimony Sunday. I suspect most of the members had little or no food available, so fasting may have been easy. Testimony meeting was wonderful. There were many short testimonies about the restoration, seminary, scriptures and the atonement of Jesus Christ. As we sat there listening, it became crystal clear to both Sister Markham and me that the members in Budaburam Branch have all that is really important as witnessed by their testimonies. The other stuff we have is nice, but not necessary. In fact, the stuff we have may at times cloud the value of our most precious pearls of great price. Sister Markham gave a beautiful closing prayer.

About once a month we would see a hired, rusty old 12 passenger van pull into the Accra Temple Complex and then watch as 20-25 smiling saints from Budaburam Branch climbed out and entered the House of the Lord as they prepared to be kings and queens in a future existence.

### **The universal atonement is a great equalizer for mankind.**

Early one Sunday we drove way out in the jungle to the city of Assin Foso. Four branches meet in a beautiful building the Church has constructed on a hillside there. The tithing you pay in Spanish Fork helps provide great blessings for saints in West Africa. Each generation in the gospel builds for the next. As I trained District leaders in church financial policies and procedures, Sister Markham attended a block of meetings then went out to our car to rest. Ours was one of only two cars in the large parking lot. Most people walk to church---not because it is close, but because walking is their only option.

Another car soon sputtered into the lot and stalled just past the entrance. Three men got out and raised the hood, releasing a cloud of smoke and steam. They were dressed in white shirts and ties, so they were likely members of the church. They stood around the car with folded arms and sang 'Praise to the Man.' One offered a prayer. Other Priesthood brethren leaving or coming to their meetings stopped and joined them. A group of 10-12 sang another hymn, then another prayer was offered. Then they sang 'Redeemer of Israel' and a final prayer was said. After the hood was shut, the three men got back into the car, the engine started smoothly and they drove away. The brothers who had joined this circle very nonchalantly went back to their activities.

On the way back to Accra, Sister Markham told me about this experience and later showed me a candid picture she had discretely taken from our car. I immediately stated that the car had simply overheated and stopped just long enough for it to cool down. When we returned home, the control for the air conditioner in our apartment wouldn't work. I grabbed a screw driver, but Sister Markham got out her hymnbook. The control I was working on started functioning just as she finished the third hymn.

**If we are not mindful of the spirit, the material things we have and the secular learning we obtain will sometimes inhibit our development of faith sufficient to take full advantage of the precious gift of the atonement.**

One more story---some good friends of ours, Dale and Leah Huff from Bountiful were serving as proselyting missionaries in a small village named Dodowa about 30 miles east of Accra. Dale grew up in Lake Shore and graduated from Spanish Fork High School in the 40's. That's right, this faithful man is putting the promise in section 84 verse 33 "unto the renewing of their bodies" to the test. As part of their community awareness effort they visit schools and talk with the faculty and students. It is a treat for children in these little communities to actually meet white people. Having all the children know them makes contacting families in the village much easier for the missionaries.

Three miles outside Dodowa are a few compounds of mud huts in an area called Sotad. This is a farming village. There is a primary school and the Huff's met a Sotad teacher who invited them to visit the school. Their visit was announced to the students in advance. The day they arrived at Sotad, they were swarmed by excited youth. They soon met a 5 year old girl who was not a student, but had come to see them. She was a happy little girl with a magnetic smile and a sparkle in her eye. The amazing thing is that she is crippled by two severely clubbed feet. Both hip joints are dislocated from birth. Her hut is about half a mile from the school. When she learned from friends that two 'white faces' were going to visit the school, she spider crawled along a jungle path to be there. She hoped that some how they might be able to help her. Her name is Rebecca Tetteh. She only speaks Dangbe, a rather unusual dialect. Her effort obviously touched the Huff's.

Their next trip to Accra included visits with the Humanitarian missionaries to apply for a small wheelchair for Rebecca. They also shared several digital pictures with us which we in turn posted on the website where we blogged our mission. Several missionaries started praying for little Rebecca.

There is not time to mention all the little miracles that started popping up like mushrooms after summer rains. Rebecca got a wheelchair and started attending school with the help of her friends pushing. The biggest news was from a charity hospital sponsored by the Scottish Rite Masons in Dallas, which offered to donate the complete medical care to correct Rebecca feet and hips. Preliminary medical assessment indicated she would need to be a patient there for at least six months.

As we worked in our spare time to get better medical information on Rebecca and to learn about visas for the US, there were many challenges, not the least of which was to do this without creating any expectations with Rebecca and her family. The biggest obstacle was US visas. The law says there must be compelling evidence that a person will return to Ghana before a visa can be granted. Our country is so rich with opportunity as seen through the eyes of a Ghanaian that most would risk jail and even death to stay here. There was no chance that one of Rebecca parents or even grandparents would be allowed to accompany her. But if we could show that the needed medical treatment was not available in Ghana and if we could find a US sponsor to care for Rebecca while in the US and who would personally guarantee her return, then she could get a visa.

I will never forget a conversation that Sister Markham and I had while returning from a visit with Rebecca's family at their hut in Sotad. Taking a little girl from Sotad, Ghana to Dallas, Texas for six months would amount to alien abduction. Then to put her back in the hut in Sotad would be like criminal abandonment. The cultural gap is difficult for anyone who has not experienced both environments to comprehend. Actually bridging it seemed impossible. But we both felt impressed that we should be pursuing this. However we were not sure what to do next.

Sister Markham then said, "It is simple. We go home in November, we visit our children and grandchildren in December, we relock our condo in Provo and rent an apartment in Dallas in January, then I fly back and pick up Rebecca in February." We had two grandkids and a daughter-in-law join our family while we were missionaries whom we had never met. We had plans for worthwhile activities that would be postponed. Rebecca doesn't speak English---we don't speak Dangbe. She has likely never seen a flush toilet. The consequences and challenges of this simple proposal were enormous. Is this what the Lord wanted us to do? Rebecca and her family are NOT members of the church. Hundreds of good members could also benefit from this kind of support. People already in the US could benefit from our fulltime service. It is more than 10% probable that Rebecca will die from Malaria or another disease before she reaches adulthood in Ghana.

I don't share this sacred experience with you to taut our righteousness. This was a case where the spirit was willing, but the body and mind were still weak. After much soul searching, we made the decision to do this, took it to the Lord for confirmation, and then went forward

The mushroom patch of miracles soon produced another bumper crop. In pursuing the medical questions for the visa, we were led through the inspiration of a faithful Ghanaian church leader who is a doctor to a Ghanaian orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Addo. We understand he is one of a few orthopedic surgeons in the country. It is not a popular profession since almost no one can afford the services. He speaks Dangbe, Rebecca's native tongue. He examined Rebecca and concluded

he could NOT do the complicated foot surgeries. But, he is associated with a humanitarian medical group from the US that comes to Ghana twice a year to do spinal, joint and club foot surgery. They do it in the training hospital in Accra to teach Ghanaian medical people.

The group was founded by an orthopedic surgeon in NYC who emigrated when it was allowed from Ghana at age 17, worked his way through college and medical school as a janitor and has a very successful practice. He is giving back. The team includes an expert in club foot surgery and an expert in setting the small bones that must be broken to straighten the feet. Dr. Addo recommended Rebecca's case to the team and she is on the schedule for surgery this year. The team has also located a nun from Louisiana who operates a small clinic for children with orthopedic needs in Nsawam, Ghana, about 40 miles north of Accra. Rebecca's post-op therapy can happen there. No alien abduction, no criminal abandonment---everything happens in Ghana.

By the way, we heard from other missionaries that Rebecca and her family make the six mile round trip each week to the Sunday School group in Dodowa. That little congregation is growing and will someday be a branch, then a ward. I fully expect to see a picture in two years when she turns eight of Rebecca walking into a font. I believe she is a special spirit; I don't know how the Lord will use her. Maybe she has already fulfilled her mission by providing steep learning experiences for some old missionaries.

In Genesis 22, Abraham was instructed to go up the mountain and sacrifice his only son Isaac, not by a vengeful or spiteful or cruel God, but by a loving Father in Heaven who tested Abraham so he could learn more about the atoning sacrifice to be completed by Jesus Christ. It would be a great blessing to all of Abraham's posterity.

I don't expect to ever be tested like Abraham was, but I can testify that my experiences in West Africa among a people of very great faith, helped me better understand the atonement. Being spiritually attuned to know God's will for each of us individually, then having sufficient faith to be obedient even in the face of real sacrifice truly opens the window of understanding and love for the atoning sacrifice of our Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name I leave you this testimony.  
Amen