

# A Close Look at Scriptural Teachings Regarding Jesus Feeling Our Pains as Part of His Atonement

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Scriptural teachings regarding the Atonement of Jesus Christ represent the most important and cherished doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Elder Richard G. Scott emphasized its importance, stating, “The atonement of Jesus Christ is the single most significant event that ever has or ever will occur.”<sup>1</sup> Elder Neal A. Maxwell called it “the central act in all of human history” and “the hinge on which all else that finally matters turned.”<sup>2</sup> And Elder Bruce R. McConkie declared it to be “the center and core and heart of revealed religion.”<sup>3</sup>

The majority of what we learn and teach in the Church about Christ’s Atonement is solidly grounded in scripture. For example, dozens of scriptural passages attest that Jesus suffered for our sins, died on our behalf, and was resurrected in order to redeem us from the powers of death, hell, and the devil (see, for example, 1 Cor. 15:3; Heb. 2:14–15; 2 Ne. 2:6–9; 9:5–9, 19; Mosiah 15:7–9; 16:4–15; Alma 33:22; 42:12–24; Hel. 14:15–18; 3 Ne. 9:21–22; 11:11; and D&C 18:11–12). Yet not everything we understand and teach in the Church about Jesus’s Atonement is so scripturally clear. The purpose of this paper is to examine one such scripturally ambiguous example, what I will term the “empathetic” aspect of the Atonement,

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1. Richard G. Scott, “Finding Forgiveness,” *Ensign* 25, no. 5 (May 1995): 75.

2. Neal A. Maxwell, “Willing to Submit,” *Ensign* 15, no. 5 (May 1985): 70.

3. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 81.

by which I mean the idea that Jesus's empathy<sup>4</sup> toward humanity was gained by way of personally experiencing our pains and sicknesses during his atoning sacrifice.

It is strikingly clear, scripturally speaking, that Jesus Christ does understand each of us intimately and can compassionately empathize with and comfort anyone who is going through anything at any time (see Heb. 2:16–18; 4:14–16; Alma 7:11–13; and D&C 62:1). He has consistently demonstrated his ability to do so throughout scripture, including as the premortal Jehovah (see, for example, Mosiah 24:13–14; Alma 31:31–38; 58:10–12; D&C 107:55), the mortal Jesus (see, for example, Matt. 9:20–22; Mark 1:40–42), and the postmortal Christ (see, for example, 3 Ne. 17:5–9; D&C 62:1; 121:7–11). What is unclear, however, is whether Jesus's sufferings in Gethsemane and on Calvary constitute *the source* of Jesus's empathy toward mankind. Was his atoning sacrifice *the way* Christ came to truly understand us?

This question has grown out of the fact that in the last few decades it has become increasingly common in the Church to read or hear something to the effect that during his Atonement in Gethsemane and on the cross at Calvary, in addition to suffering for our sins, Jesus somehow personally experienced or took upon himself every individual human anguish, sickness, sadness, suffering, and infirmity so that he can perfectly empathize with and succor us as we experience the same in our lives. Such teachings situate the source of Jesus's empathy squarely within the context of his atoning sacrifice. But is this scripturally accurate?

This question may not at first seem consequential. After all, one might ask, isn't the important thing the fact that Jesus *does* understand us? Does understanding *how* he gained his empathy toward us have any bearing whatsoever on our faith? These are fair questions. While it is certainly true that the *how* of Jesus's empathy should not influence our confidence in his ability to offer us help and strength as we may need it, it is also true that if this empathetic Atonement idea is mistaken, then believing it to be correct may adversely impact our understanding of Christ's Atonement and consequently our efforts to exercise faith in him. It might be somewhat analogous to President Russell M. Nelson's caution to Latter-day Saints about using shortcut phrases to refer to Jesus's Atonement—such as “the enabling power of the Atonement,”

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4. “Empathy” as used throughout this paper is defined as the ability to understand and appreciate the feelings and experiences of another (see Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “pain, *n.1*,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/61284>).

or “applying the Atonement,” or “being strengthened by the Atonement.” Such expressions, he warned, “present a real risk of misdirecting faith by treating the *event* as if *it* had living existence . . . independent of . . . Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup> In a related way, this empathetic Atonement teaching, if mistaken, may obscure and detract from the doctrine of Jesus’s Atonement and unintentionally misdirect our efforts to exercise faith in him and what he has accomplished on our behalf. Seen in light of these implications, the question seems consequential indeed.

One Latter-day Saint author, Chieko N. Okazaki, who favored this empathetic Atonement idea, took it to its furthest conclusions, writing that “Jesus experienced the totality of mortal existence in Gethsemane,” meaning that “he experienced everything—absolutely everything” there. He therefore “knows what it felt like when your mother died of cancer—how it was for your mother, how it still is for you. He knows what it felt like to lose the student body election. . . . He experienced the slave ship sailing from Ghana toward Virginia. He experienced the gas chambers at Dachau. He experienced Napalm in Vietnam. He knows about drug addiction and alcoholism.” This logic also includes women’s issues. “There is nothing you have experienced *as a woman*,” Okazaki wrote, “that he does not also know and recognize. . . . He understands about pregnancy and giving birth. . . . He knows about PMS and cramps and menopause. He understands about rape and infertility and abortion.”<sup>6</sup>

Conversely, Latter-day Saint author and scholar Robert L. Millet has questioned the validity of viewing Jesus’s Atonement as the source of his empathy. “Did Jesus really suffer delivery pains in Gethsemane?” he asks. “Did he suffer an ACL tear? Did he receive a rejection letter from Stanford? Or, rather, is it the case that his perfect empathy comes out of his perfect love?”<sup>7</sup> Millet cautioned, “If the Atonement of Jesus Christ is so broad, so expansive that it covers most everything . . . then it will gradually lose its meaning and full impact in our lives.”<sup>8</sup>

Whether true or false, the presence of this empathetic Atonement teaching in the Church has significant consequences on our Atonement theology. If it is true, it represents a profound expansion of our

5. Russell M. Nelson, “Drawing the Power of Jesus Christ into Our Lives,” *Ensign* 47, no. 5 (May 2017): 40, emphasis original.

6. Chieko N. Okazaki, *Lighten Up* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 174–75, emphasis original.

7. As quoted in Anthony Sweat, *Christ in Every Hour* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), 81.

8. Robert L. Millet, *The Atoning One* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 158.

previous understanding of Christ's Atonement, which should be celebrated and proclaimed. If it is true, our Atonement theology is being imbued with an intensity of intimacy and connectedness between Christ and mankind beyond anything previously understood. If, on the other hand, Christ did not personally experience the totality of mankind's personal suffering during his Atonement, if he did not actually feel our specific non-sin-related afflictions either in Gethsemane or at Calvary (or both), then to teach that he did so obscures and detracts from the truth of what actually occurred. The risk is diverting Church members' faith toward an aspect of Jesus's Atonement that isn't real.

Thus, the rising prevalence of this teaching in the Church raises the following important question, which this paper seeks to address:

Are there clear passages of scripture that substantiate the idea that (a) during his sufferings either in Gethsemane or at Calvary, Jesus personally experienced all human anguish and suffering unrelated to sin, which (b) constitutes the source of his deep empathy toward mankind?

The intention of specifically probing the scriptural basis of this empathetic Atonement concept is to probe its doctrinal reliability. In a General Authority training meeting, President Gordon B. Hinckley explained the primacy of canonized scripture in determining doctrine when he stated, "When all is said and done, the test of the doctrine lies in the standard works of the Church."<sup>9</sup> Our canonized scriptures, he declared in another training to Church leaders, "provide the standard by which all gospel doctrine is measured."<sup>10</sup> Elder D. Todd Christofferson affirmed that "the scriptures are the touchstone for measuring correctness and truth."<sup>11</sup>

General Authorities have consistently taught that even their words are to be measured against the standard works. We "are not bound to accept . . . as truth," President Harold B. Lee explained on this matter, anyone's teaching "that is not substantiated by the standard Church works"—meaning the scriptures—"regardless of his position in the Church."<sup>12</sup> The doctrinal teachings of General Authorities, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith confirmed, should be accepted as true "only in so far

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9. General Authority Training Meeting, October 1, 1996, cited in *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 574.

10. "Cornerstones of Responsibility," Regional Representatives' Seminar, April 5, 1991, 2.

11. D. Todd Christofferson, "The Blessing of Scripture," *Ensign* 40, no. 5 (May 2010): 34.

12. Harold B. Lee, *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 543–44.

as they accord with the revealed word in the standard works.”<sup>13</sup> Elder Bruce R. McConkie elaborated further on this point, saying that if and when there are doctrinal discrepancies between scripture and modern Apostles, “it is the scripture that prevails. This is one of the reasons we call our scriptures *The Standard Works*. They are,” he continues, “the standard of judgment and the measuring rod against which all doctrines and views are weighed, and it does not make one particle of difference whose views are involved. The scriptures always take precedence.”<sup>14</sup>

Such repeated teachings of Church leaders on the doctrinal primacy of scripture represent both a challenge and an invitation to all gospel students to confirm the validity of doctrinal concepts through sound scriptural substantiation. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, only canonized scripture will be considered in this doctrinal analysis without reference to teachings of General Authorities, some of whom, I acknowledge, have taught the empathetic Atonement idea. It should not be understood that this paper is intended to pit canonized scripture against the teachings of any General Authorities. Instead, the purpose of this paper is to focus keenly on a thorough exegetical examination of what the scriptures themselves say on this matter in order to carefully test, measure, and weigh the doctrinal reliability of this concept. This we will do below by carefully examining the scriptural passages most frequently invoked to support it.

## **An Analysis of Scriptural Teachings**

When the empathetic Atonement concept is taught, there are four scripture passages consistently invoked to support it. These passages are Alma 7:11–13, Matthew 8:17, Isaiah 53:4, and 2 Nephi 9:21. Each of these passages will be analyzed to assess whether they support the empathetic Atonement teaching or not. However, the conclusions drawn herein will, of course, only represent the best efforts of this author to deduce the intent of each passage by evaluating context, intertextual clues, and word meanings. It is hoped that these efforts will ultimately motivate further careful exegetical work by others on these and related passages.

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13. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:203–4.

14. “Finding Answers to Gospel Questions,” letter dated July 1, 1980, published in *Teaching Seminary: Preservice Readings*, Religion 370, 471, and 475 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 44, emphasis original.

The order of analysis will track from Isaiah 53:4 to Matthew 8:17 to 2 Nephi 9:21 and conclude with Alma 7:11–13.

### Analysis of Isaiah 53:4

*“Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.”*

Isaiah 53 is part of Isaiah’s writing known as the fourth servant song,<sup>15</sup> which begins in Isaiah 52:13 and concludes at the end of Isaiah 53. The suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is never identified by name but is interpreted by Abinadi, Alma, Matthew, Mark, John, Philip, Paul, and Jesus himself as referring to the mortal Christ (see Mosiah 14–15, Alma 7:11, Matt. 8:14–17, Mark 15:28, John 12:38, Acts 8:32–33, and Luke 22:37). Therefore, verse 3, which speaks of this servant as being “despised and rejected of men” and “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief,” is typically interpreted as saying that Jesus, during his mortal life, would be socially despised and rejected and would experience sorrow and grief. Verse 4 then says he would somehow bear “our griefs” (the Hebrew here can also be translated as sicknesses or diseases) and carry “our sorrows” (the Hebrew can here also be translated as pains or afflictions).

What precisely Isaiah means by saying he would *bear* our griefs and *carry* our sorrows in verse 4 is not completely clear, and different scriptural authors interpret this phrase in divergent ways (we will consider two such divergent interpretations in Matthew and Alma below). The crucial point for our purposes here is to note that verse 4 is never interpreted within scripture as a reference to Jesus personally experiencing our individual griefs and sorrows as part of his Atonement. The interpretation of these phrases as indicating a cosmic transfer of the aggregate sicknesses and afflictions of mankind upon Jesus either in Gethsemane or at Calvary is scripturally nonexistent. As a case in point, the prophet Abinadi, who provides the most detailed explanation of Isaiah 53 in all of scripture, draws no connection between verse 4 and Jesus’s atoning

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15. Bible scholars have identified at least four servant songs in Isaiah (also known as servant poems or Songs of the Suffering Servant), which are (1) Isaiah 42:1–9, (2) Isaiah 49:1–7, (3) Isaiah 50:4–9, and (4) Isaiah 52:13–53:12. See, for instance, *The HarperCollins Study Bible, Revised Edition* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), 965; see also Terry B. Ball, “Isaiah’s ‘Other’ Servant Songs,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament: The 38th Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 207–18.

sacrifice. Rather, Abinadi links Isaiah's image of Jesus bearing "our griefs" and carrying "our sorrows" to episodes during his mortal life where he "suffereth temptation, and yieldeth not to the temptation, but suffereth himself to be mocked, and scourged, and cast out, and disowned by his people" (Mosiah 15:5). Thus, for modern readers to interpret this verse as stating that Jesus will personally experience the griefs and sorrows of countless billions of mortals either in Gethsemane or on Calvary (or both) is to read more into the text than any scripture writers have done. It seems more reasonable to conclude, as Abinadi suggests, that this verse is merely descriptive of various distressing and painful episodes Jesus would experience in his own life as he briefly shared the mortal condition with us.

### Analysis of Matthew 8:17

*"That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses."*

In Matthew 8, we read that while in Capernaum, a fishing town more than one hundred miles north of Jerusalem situated on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus visited Peter's house and "saw his wife's mother laid, and sick of a fever. And he touched her hand, and the fever left her: and she arose, and ministered unto them" (Matt. 8:14–15). Matthew records that later that same evening "many that were possessed with devils" were brought to Jesus, "and he cast out the spirits with his word, and healed all that were sick" (Matt. 8:16). After telling his readers this much, Matthew punctuates this episode by declaring, "That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias [Isaiah] the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses" (Matt. 8:17).

Here then is Matthew's interpretation of Isaiah 53:4. It is textually clear that Matthew sees in Jesus's actions in Capernaum the fulfillment of Isaiah 53:4. To Matthew, taking "our infirmities" and bearing "our sicknesses" was precisely what Jesus was doing at Peter's home as he healed those who were sick or possessed with devils. Thus, Matthew's reading of Isaiah 53:4 is something close to saying that God's servant "took our infirmities away" and "bare our sicknesses from us."

From this analysis, it is not clear why Matthew 8:17 would be invoked to support the view that Christ experienced our individual infirmities and sicknesses as part of his Atonement. When viewed in context, Matthew is unmistakably interpreting Isaiah's words as applying to Jesus's

actions of curing a fever, casting out devils, and healing the sick in Capernaum—not to his atoning actions, which would occur much later in Gethsemane and Calvary.

### Analysis of 2 Nephi 9:21

*“And he cometh into the world that he may save all men if they will hearken unto his voice; for behold, he suffereth the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam.”*

Situated within the prophet Jacob’s more lengthy work dealing with the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises to the House of Israel (2 Ne. 6–10) is Jacob’s masterful sermon on the Atonement of Jesus Christ (2 Ne. 9). It is within this sermon that we find another passage often invoked to support the empathetic view of the Atonement. The phrasing in 2 Nephi 9:21 that Jesus would suffer “the pains of all . . . men, women, and children” is used by some to confirm the idea that Jesus somehow personally felt our mortal sorrows and anguish during his Atonement. To analyze the meaning of this phrase, however, we need the context provided by the verse that follows (v. 22). The main thought in these two verses is emphasized here for clarity. “And he cometh into the world that he may save all men if they will hearken unto his voice; for behold, *he suffereth the pains of all men*, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam. And *he suffereth this that the resurrection might pass upon all men*, that all might stand before him at the great and judgment day.”

Note that Jacob’s complete thought spread across these verses is that Jesus will come into the world to save all men by suffering the pains of all men *in order* to enable the resurrection of all the family of Adam. This direct connection between “pains” and “the resurrection” calls into question the justification for using this verse to support the idea that Christ experienced all the non-sin-related suffering of humanity in Gethsemane and Calvary. How, we might ask, would feeling our pains as part of his Atonement on the one hand make possible the universal resurrection of all mankind on the other? Jacob’s explanation that Jesus (a) experienced the pains of all mankind as part of his Atonement so that (b) he could resurrect all mankind, does not fit the general empathetic Atonement logic, which instead says that Jesus (a) personally experienced all of humanity’s sorrows as part of his Atonement so that (b) he could empathize with us and help us in our times of need. Indeed, Jacob is teaching something altogether different.



To understand Jacob's meaning we need to understand how he is using the word *pains* in verse 21, or—since we do not have Jacob's original word in his native language—we need to know what the various English meanings are of this word and which one best fits the resurrection context of verse 22. In Webster's 1828 Dictionary, one of the meanings of the word *pain* is "penalty; punishment suffered or denounced; suffering or evil inflicted as a punishment for a crime."<sup>16</sup> This idea of punishment fits the most archaic meaning of the word *pain*. In fact, the etymology of the English word comes from the Old French word *peine*, meaning "suffering, punishment, Hell's torments"; the Latin word *poena*, meaning "punishment" or "penalty"; and the ancient Greek word *poinë*, meaning "penalty."<sup>17</sup> As we will see, this original meaning of *pains* as "penalties" or "punishments" best makes sense of Jacob's teaching within the broader context of 2 Nephi 9. When this meaning is inserted back into the text it reads as follows: "And he cometh into the world that he may save all men if they will hearken unto his voice; for behold, *he suffereth the [penalties/punishments] of all men*, yea, the [penalties/punishments] of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam. And *he suffereth [their penalties/punishments] that the resurrection might pass upon all men*, that all might stand before him at the great and judgment day" (2 Ne. 9:21–22; emphasis added).

This meaning directly matches the substance of Jacob's teachings earlier in this chapter. According to Jacob, the penalty or punishment due to mortals as a consequence of the Fall is that our physical bodies will die, rot, and crumble (see 2 Ne. 9:6–7)—what Jacob refers to as "temporal" death (2 Ne. 9:11)—and our spirits will become subject to the miserable captivity of the devil in a state of endless torment (see 2 Ne. 9:8–9, 19, 26; see also Lehi's similar teaching in 2 Ne. 2:27, 29)—what Jacob refers to as "spiritual death" (2 Ne. 9:12). Accordingly, Jesus thus experienced the punishments due to every man, woman, and child—the punishments of temporal and spiritual death—by offering his own life as atonement to answer for our sins. One of Jacob's core messages in this chapter is that by entering into death and satanic subjection (the universal punishments—that is, "pains"—of the Fall) and then breaking the bands of death through his resurrection, Jesus created "a way for our escape from

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16. Webster's 1828 Dictionary, s.v. "pain," <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/pain>.

17. Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. "pain (n.)," accessed June 8, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=pain>.

the grasp of this awful monster[,] . . . the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit” (2 Ne. 9:10).

When verses 21–22 are thus read in the broader context of Jacob’s teachings that immediately precede them in this chapter, his message becomes clearer: Jesus “suffereth the pains of all men [that is, their punishments of temporal and spiritual death] that the resurrection might pass upon all men, that all might stand before him at the great and judgment day” (2 Ne. 9:21–22). From this contextual analysis, we conclude that the prophet Jacob’s use of the word “pains” in 2 Nephi 9:21 is not a reference to Christ personally experiencing our physical and emotional discomforts to enable him to empathize with us but instead is a reference to Christ experiencing our collective punishments so as to enable us to overcome death and hell and to receive a proper judgment commensurate with our repentance.<sup>18</sup>

### Analysis of Alma 7:11

*“And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.”*

In a speech to the Nephite people in the land of Gideon, Alma says, “I trust that you do not worship idols, but that ye do worship the true and the living God, and that ye look forward for the remission of your sins, with an everlasting faith, which is to come” (Alma 7:6). Alma’s desire for his people was to look forward specifically to the remission of their sins, which was coming. “For behold,” Alma continues, “there be many things to come,” but “there is one thing which is of more importance than they all—for behold, the time is not far distant that the Redeemer liveth and cometh among his people” (Alma 7:7).

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18. In June 1829, Jesus confirmed the above interpretation of 2 Nephi 9:21–22 when he explained to Joseph Smith that his physical death was equivalent to the “pain of all men,” which was connected to his resurrection and the bringing of all men unto him. His exact words were “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. And he hath risen again from the dead, that he might bring all men unto him, on conditions of repentance” (D&C 18:11–12; emphasis added). The Apostle Peter, on the day of Pentecost, likewise testified that the crucified Jesus had been “raised up, *having loosed the pains of death*: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it” (Acts 2:24; emphasis added). This is a third scriptural instance where “pains,” as used in relation to Jesus’s Atonement, is associated directly with death.

Alma then sketches a few key details about the mortal life of the Son of God, largely rehearsing to the people what had been taught by King Benjamin and Abinadi about the coming of Jesus Christ. “And behold,” Alma says, “he shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers, she being a virgin, a precious and chosen vessel, who shall be overshadowed and conceive by the power of the Holy Ghost, and bring forth a son, yea, even the Son of God” (Alma 7:10; see also Mosiah 3:8).<sup>19</sup> Alma then explains that following Christ’s birth, “he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people” (Alma 7:11).

Verse 11 is sometimes cited as though Alma were introducing a new doctrine about how Jesus would personally experience all of our pains, afflictions, temptations, and sicknesses as part of his atoning sacrifice. Yet, when read in light of verse 10, instead of situating the events of this verse within the context of Jesus’s Atonement either in Gethsemane or on Calvary, Alma appears only to be rehearsing to the people what had been taught previously by Abinadi and King Benjamin about the coming of the Son of God into mortality and the challenges he would endure in his own mortal life prior to his Atonement. The chronological flow between verses 10 and 11 suggests that the phrase “he shall go forth suffering” is best understood as a reference to Jesus’s mortal life following his birth. That is, following his birth into mortality Jesus would “go forth,” or go throughout his own life, suffering every kind of pain, affliction, and temptation which mortals are prone to experience. An angel uses this same phrase when explaining to King Benjamin that “the Lord Omnipotent . . . shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay, and *shall go forth* amongst men, working mighty miracles, such as healing the sick, raising the dead, causing the lame to walk, the blind to receive their sight, and the deaf to hear, and curing all manner of diseases” (Mosiah 3:5; emphasis added). Abinadi uses it, too, when he asks, “Have [all the prophets] 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?” (Mosiah 13:34; emphasis added).<sup>20</sup> “Going forth” is thus consistently associated with Jesus’s mortal sojourn as God dwelling in the flesh.

19. Alma may also be drawing here from Nephi’s teachings in 1 Nephi 11:13–21.

20. In 1 Nephi 11:24, Nephi uses a similar phrase in reference to Jesus’s mortality, saying, “I beheld the Son of God *going forth* among the children of men” (emphasis added).

Alma concludes verse 11 by saying, “And this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people”—a reference to the words of Isaiah 53:4 that we have considered above. The Hebrew words translated as “griefs” and “sorrows” in our King James version of Isaiah 53:4 can likewise be translated as “pains” and “sicknesses” as rendered here in Alma 7:11.<sup>21</sup> While some may say that the phrase “take upon him” in this passage signifies a cosmic transfer of all the pains and sicknesses of mankind during Jesus’s Atonement, this interpretation is unsupported in the text. First, Alma makes no reference to the events of Jesus’s Atonement but instead implies by narrative continuity with verse 10 that he is describing the events of Jesus’s mortal life following his birth. Also, it is vital to notice that Alma 7:11 uses the phrase “of every kind” to describe the range of Jesus’s mortal sufferings: “And he shall go forth suffering pains and afflictions and temptations *of every kind*” (emphasis added). For Alma to say that Jesus will suffer “every kind” of pain, affliction, and temptation as part of his own mortal life is vastly different from saying that Jesus will suffer “the totality of mortal existence in Gethsemane.”<sup>22</sup> Such a reading could hardly be further from Alma’s intended meaning.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, equating Alma’s “every kind” (a categorical statement) with “absolutely everything”<sup>24</sup> (an all-inclusive statement), while also assuming an Atonement context here—which Alma is not suggesting—constitutes an unfortunate but common misreading of this text. Thus, only when (1) the meaning of Alma’s “every kind” and “take upon him” phrases are misconstrued and (2) the context these phrases are describing is misjudged to be an atoning context can Alma 7:11 be used to support the empathetic Atonement idea.

In sum, the context provided by verse 10 favors a reading of verse 11 that says only that after the Son of God takes upon him mortal flesh by being born of Mary, he will go forth taking upon himself the *kinds* of pains, afflictions, and temptations that his people take upon themselves

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21. In fact, according to Latter-day Saint scholar Thomas Wayment, Alma’s rendering of “pains” and “sicknesses” is an even closer translation of the original Hebrew text than is “griefs” and “sorrows” as rendered in the King James translation. See Thomas A. Wayment, “The Hebrew Text of Alma 7:11,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 98–103.

22. Okazaki, *Lighten Up*, 174.

23. By analogy, to say that an experienced doctor has treated every *kind* of sickness and disease isn’t suggestive that the doctor has treated *every* sickness and disease. The difference between “every” and “every *kind*” is staggering in terms of scope and magnitude. We would do well to read Alma’s phrase “of every kind” in a similar light.

24. Okazaki, *Lighten Up*, 174.

as they go throughout their own mortal experiences. Alma's point here seems to be that not only will God's Son come down *among* mortals, but he will actually *become* mortal, fully shouldering in his own life all the same kinds of day-to-day suffering and pain that the mortal condition entails upon the rest of us. This, Alma is saying, is how Isaiah's words will be fulfilled about the Messiah "taking upon him" the pains and sicknesses of his people.

### Analysis of Alma 7:12

*"And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities."*

Alma 7:12 may be the passage most frequently invoked to scripturally support the empathetic Atonement teaching and therefore deserves our most careful analysis. It is important to note that the content and sequencing of Alma's teachings in this verse bear a striking likeness to the teachings of Abinadi in Mosiah 15:7–9, indicating that Alma is likely recalling and drawing upon Abinadi's words on these points—a likelihood strengthened by the fact that Alma quotes from Abinadi's teachings in Mosiah 15 in his subsequent teachings about Christ.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, after detailing the ill-treatment Jesus would experience in his life, Abinadi explains that he would (1) "be led, crucified, and slain," after which he would (2) break "the bands of death," which would (3) give him "power to make intercession for the children of men—having ascended into heaven, having the bowels of mercy; being filled with compassion towards the children of men" (Mosiah 15:7–9). In like manner, in Alma 7:12, Alma follows Abinadi's same sequence as he explains that Jesus would (1) die, then (2) loose "the bands of death" (Abinadi's phrase), and finally (3) have his "bowels . . . filled with mercy" toward his people (a close paraphrasing of Abinadi's words), having personally come to "know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (an idea strongly akin

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25. Alma draws upon Abinadi's words in Mosiah 15 without attribution in at least two other instances. Compare, for example, Alma's words in Alma 40:16 with Abinadi's words in Mosiah 15:21 and Alma's words in Alma 42:11 with Abinadi's words in Mosiah 15:19. Such evidence illustrates that Alma drew insight from Abinadi's teachings on Christ in Mosiah 15 and had the propensity to quote from them without attribution in his own teachings.

to both the intercessory and compassionate aspects described by Abinadi). As we will see below, understanding Abinadi as Alma's primary source for the content and sequence of ideas in this verse is invaluable in interpreting his meaning.

It is significant that in both Abinadi's and Alma's teachings there is an indisputable increase in Jesus's empathy toward mankind following his mortal life. Both his "power to make intercession" and his knowledge of "how to succor his people" expand appreciably following his own mortal sojourn. And given the central question of this paper, it is important to ask whether this empathic expansion toward mankind was caused by the events of Jesus's atoning sacrifice, by his own personal experiences as a suffering mortal prior to his Atonement, or somehow both. What did Alma believe?

Some have interpreted the following statement of Alma's in verse 12 as a reference to Jesus's Atonement: "And he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities." But did Alma intend this idea to be understood within the context of Jesus's Atonement or the whole of his mortal life? Let's examine the evidence.

On the one hand, a case could be made for an Atonement context for this phrase based on the fact that it immediately follows Alma's statement about Jesus's death at the beginning of verse 12. Alma says that Jesus "will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people"—a clear reference to Christ's Atonement—and then immediately follows in the same sentence saying, "and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy." The immediacy in proximity of the second thought in this sentence to the first could imply that they are associated as part of the same atoning experience.

On the other hand, it is difficult to read Alma as suggesting either that Jesus "will take upon him their infirmities" *at* his death or that he would do so *after* his death. Alma's sequencing here, therefore, is quite peculiar. One wonders why he would speak of Jesus's death and resurrection first and then talk about him taking upon himself the infirmities of mortality. This does not follow a Gethsemane to Calvary progression as we might expect if Alma was intending to connect this idea within the context of Jesus's Atonement. What seems the most likely (and most simple) explanation for Alma's sequencing here is, as noted above, that he is merely following Abinadi's conceptual flow in Mosiah 15:7–9 of

(1) Jesus dying, then (2) breaking the bands of death, and then (3) being filled with mercy toward mankind. This likelihood is strengthened by the fact that Alma clearly draws on Abinadi's language about Christ from Mosiah 15 elsewhere in his teachings.<sup>26</sup> Thus Alma's flow of ideas here is best understood as mirroring Abinadi rather than as introducing a revolutionary new doctrine about the universal transfer of all mankind's infirmities upon Jesus during the events of his atoning sacrifice.

Indeed, when verse 12 is read in the context of verses 10 and 11, Alma can be understood as saying essentially this: the Son of God would be born of a mortal woman named Mary (v. 10), which would enable him to personally experience mortal vicissitudes of every kind (v. 11), which would enable him (1) to take upon himself death so he can "loose the bands of death which bind his people" and (2) to personally experience in his own life the infirmities of the mortal condition so he can know how to succor his people in their infirmities. Alma is thus highlighting the absolutely essential condition that Jesus be incarnated to enable him both to redeem his people from death *and* to draw compassionate insights from his own difficult mortal experiences regarding how to mercifully succor mankind. When Alma's words are combined with Abinadi's testimony in Mosiah 15, we have twin prophetic witnesses underscoring the deep empathetic compassion Jesus would gain for mankind by way of his own mortal life brimming with temptation, trial, sickness, infirmity, and flagrant ill-treatment at the hands of his fellow mortals. According to this prophetic pair, by becoming one of us Jesus learned keenly and experientially about all the distressing facets of mortality and was thereby filled with both a compassionate mercy toward us and an acute insight as to how to help us as we struggle in our own infirmities.

This understanding of Christ's empathy growing out of his own mortal experiences is paralleled in the letter to the Hebrews. In Hebrews 2:16–18, we read, "For verily [Christ] took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham"—that is, he became mortal, rather than angelic, just like the rest of Abraham's seed. The epistle continues, "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."

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26. See footnote 25.

Note here that Jesus took upon himself mortal flesh so that “in all things” he became like us. One crucial reason he did so was that he might mercifully act the part of the high priest and make reconciliation for our sins. Another reason was that by personally experiencing what it means to be tempted, “he is able to succour them that are tempted.”

Two chapters later, in Hebrews 4:14–16, the author of Hebrews returns to this theme, saying, “Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

Because the Son of God was “in all points tempted like as we are,” he understands the “feeling of our infirmities.” We can therefore boldly approach him to “obtain mercy” and “help in time of need.” The parallels between Hebrews 2 and 4 and Alma 7 are quite striking. Indeed, these verses in Hebrews offer independent scriptural support for the interpretation of Alma 7:12 above in which Jesus’s empathy, compassion, and mercy toward mankind—and his ability to succor us—grow out of the temptations and infirmities he experienced in his own mortal life, rather than by somehow personally experiencing all of our specific pains, sicknesses, and infirmities during his Atonement.

### Analysis of Alma 7:13

*“Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance; and now behold, this is the testimony which is in me.”*

Alma’s brief testimony of the life of God’s Son is brought to a conclusion in verse 13. Recall that verse 12 concluded with the idea that Jesus would come to “know” how to succor us as a result of his personal experience with mortal infirmity. Alma’s next word “now” at the beginning of verse 13 signals that a clarification is likely about to occur. He explains that “the Spirit”—almost certainly a reference to the eternal spirit within Jesus<sup>27</sup>—“knoweth all things.” Why would Alma say this? What point

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27. See Jared T. Parker, “Abinadi on the Father and the Son: Interpretation and Application,” in *Living the Book of Mormon: Abiding by Its Precepts*, ed. Gaye Strathearn and Charles Swift (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 136–50.



might he be attempting to clarify? The subtle issue at play here is that it likely sounded odd to Alma's audience that God's Son (also referred to by Abinadi as "God himself" in Mosiah 15:1) would *learn* something through his infirmities. After all, could a God—who knows all things—come to know *anything* as a mortal he did not already know beforehand, including how to succor us? Is it a contradiction to suggest that a being who already knows all things could come into the flesh and learn something?

In verse 13, Alma seems to be attempting to explain that these are somehow both true: the eternal spirit within Jesus knew all things before his mortal birth, and yet in mortality he also came to "know according to the flesh" how to succor us in our infirmities. Alma is content to leave it at that. Rather than attempting to unravel this epistemological Gordian knot for his listeners, he instead only underscores what he seems to feel is the most central aspect of Jesus's mortal mission: "Nevertheless," he says, "the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance" (Alma 7:13).

In other words, Alma seems to be saying that Jesus would come to earth not *primarily* to understand us better or even to learn how to succor us (because his premortal spirit already knew all things); rather, Jesus would become mortal primarily to "take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance." It seems, in other words, that Alma is carefully bracketing in verse 13 what he had just said at the end of verse 12. He appears to be saying something close to this: "Although Jesus *did* come to know how to succor us in mortality, that is not the *main* reason he came to earth (since, after all, his spirit already knew all things); rather, his presence was required here—in mortal form—in order to directly deal with sin and deliver us from the consequences of our transgressions."

## Summary of Scriptural Analysis

The guiding question for this paper has been, "Are there clear passages of scripture that substantiate the idea that (1) during his sufferings either in Gethsemane or at Calvary, Jesus personally experienced all human anguish and suffering unrelated to sin, which (2) constitutes the source of his deep empathy toward mankind?" The four most oft-quoted passages used to affirm this idea have been analyzed above, and from this analysis, we are led to conclude that, instead of substantiating the idea of an empathetic component to Jesus's Atonement, each of these verses, in

various ways, trend away from that conclusion. It seems that only when the following phrases (with added emphasis) are isolated from their contexts or are assumed to be occurring within the context of Jesus's atoning experience do they appear to support the empathetic Atonement idea:

"Surely he hath borne *our* griefs, and carried *our* sorrows" (Isa. 53:4).

"Himself took *our* infirmities, and bare *our* sicknesses" (Matt. 8:17).

"He suffereth *the pains of all men*, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam" (2 Ne. 9:21).

"He will *take upon him* the pains and the sicknesses of *his people*" (Alma 7:11).

"He will *take upon him their* infirmities . . . that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:12).

When these phrases are read carefully within their contexts, however, we find in each instance, with the exception of 2 Nephi 9:21, that they are not specifically situated within nor attempting to describe the atoning experience but are instead referencing Jesus's mortal life prior to his Atonement. Thus, perhaps the most scriptural and contextually supported statement about Jesus's empathy is simply this: *Jesus's compassionate empathy toward those who experience pains, temptations, sicknesses, and infirmities in mortality was enhanced by way of his own mortal experiences living in a fallen world.* The essence of this idea was summarized well by President John Taylor, who said, "It was absolutely necessary that he should . . . have a body like ours, and be made subject to all the weaknesses of the flesh, . . . [and] be tried like other men." Having thus experienced his own mortality, President Taylor continues, Jesus can "thereby comprehend the weakness and the true character of human nature, with all its faults and foibles," so that now, "when he sees you passing through these trials and afflictions, he knows how to feel towards you—how to sympathise with you."<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has not been to definitively determine whether Jesus personally experienced the totality of humankind's suffering during his Atonement. Rather, its purpose has been to probe the degree of scriptural support for such a teaching in order to assess its doctrinal

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28. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 7:198–99 (November 13, 1859).

reliability and therefore the degree of confidence we might place in it. And while this analysis has concluded that current scriptural support is lacking to substantiate this teaching, future canonized revelation may someday determine this point with finality.

In the meantime, can we maintain confidence that Jesus truly understands us? Can a compelling scriptural case be made for hope and peace in Christ today for one grappling with debilitating depression, chronic sickness, suffocating heartache, or crushing temptation, even if Jesus did not personally experience these as part of his Atonement? Emphatically, yes! The scriptural witness is clear: after condescending from a place of flawless premortal perfection to dwell within his own fallen and infirmity-ridden flesh, Jesus went forth suffering. His mortal sojourn, rife with “pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind” (Alma 7:11), not only made him “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3) but also filled his bowels “with compassion towards the children of men” (Mosiah 15:9) and helped him “know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:12). One of the core reasons he became “fully human in every way” was so “that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest” toward a struggling humanity (Heb. 2:17, NIV). And because he was “in all points tempted like as we are” (Heb. 4:15), he “knoweth the weakness of man and how to succor them who are tempted” (D&C 62:1; see also Heb. 2:18).

In the portrait of scripture, we see a deeply compassionate Christ who was fully capacitated through the crush and struggle of his own lived mortal experiences to comfort and strengthen us as we experience our own unique commixture of afflictions. Hence the encouraging and hope-filled invitation to all of us who suffer in our myriad ways to “come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

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