

Death as a Release

For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors.

And now, as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed. Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world.

For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked¹.

I stood with the bishop next to a bed in the Intensive Care Unit of the hospital. In front of us was a form dimly recognizable as a man under all the tubes, monitors, and other medical paraphernalia. His breathing was controlled by a machine, but even so each breath sounded like it could be his last. He was not a member of our ward; in fact, as far as I know he was not a member of our church. His mother, though, was a faithful member of our ward, and had asked us to go to the hospital to administer to him. A life dominated by alcohol and drugs had rendered his body unable to respond to an infection, and he was on death's door. We gave the requested blessing, but were not surprised to hear that he had passed away before the next morning.

My part in the story might have ended there, but a few weeks later the bishop told me that the mother was consumed with despair for her son. Probably in large part due to the before-cited scripture she was in a state of torment, thinking of her son being consigned to eternal punishment for his lack of repentance before his death. The bishop asked me to prepare a sacrament meeting talk that could give this mother some hope. I had a week to prepare.

¹ Alma 34:32-35

The scripture from Alma was very familiar to me, but I had never really thought of this life being the end of repentance – somehow I was sure that there was room for some correction after death. But I had to agree – Amulek seemed to have pretty harsh words for those who die in sin. So I went back to the scriptures to seek for more understanding.

Actually, the first thought that came to me – and that formed the foundation for my talk – was from a talk my father gave on the occasion of the re-baptism of a member of our stake. At that time he talked about the covenants of membership and that, although they are meant to be a blessing and a protection to us, we can violate them to a degree where they no longer protect us, but become a weight and a hindrance. My father's words, as nearly as I can remember them, were that "a loving God has provided a way whereby we can be released from the broken covenant, so that we are no longer under condemnation from it, and can start over to correct our ways and approach God newly penitent." It seemed to me that this idea could have application not just to church membership, but also to all of mortality.

Consider the doctrine taught in Moses 4:3.

Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down.

The principle of agency is so precious before God that the *attempt* to destroy it was sufficient to cause Satan's condemnation. Also Peter taught:

For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.²

This is directly applicable to the case at hand – there is a reason to hold out hope for those who have died in their sins. The basis is that we are judged according to our actions and the desires of our hearts. We all recognize that those who are not aware of the law are not held accountable for its violation. What about those who have relinquished their ability to respond to the law?

² 1 Peter 4:6

In this case, this man had certainly made poor choices in his life, for which he will be fully accountable. His choice to become involved in drugs and alcohol was made with an awareness that they were at least against his mother's wishes for him. However, there probably came a point in his life where his addiction to those substances became such that his ability to choose whether to continue was seriously impaired, if not destroyed. It would appear to me that his accountability for his actions would be reduced in proportion his ability to dictate those actions. Finally, there came a point where mortality was no longer an opportunity for him, but a burden. He had relinquished his agency to the point where he was incapable to use it as a tool for his eternal progression. At that point death became a release from bondage. Would he still have to learn and progress in order to receive a degree of glory? Yes. Would such progression be more difficult in the spirit world than in possession of a body? It seems likely. But he would be freed from the *effects* of addictive substances, to the point where he could deal solely with the addiction itself.

So what of Amulek? I seem to have strengthened his point about the spirit that possessed this man's body at the time he left this life. However, it is exactly the point of possession that I am considering. This man relinquished his will to evil influences, but his body finally became subject long after he could exercise will. I do not believe that he was capable of assigning ownership of his body, hence the release of death. God was in control, and provided the opportunity for escape, if this man is but willing to take it.

In no way do I wish to imply that this gives license for following a path of sin. His decision to start into addictive practices was made under some degree of knowledge, and he is responsible for that degree of understanding. If I were to choose at this point in my life to adopt an addiction because I knew it would eventually overpower my ability to choose I would do so with a much greater degree of understanding and accountability. God's judgment is perfect, and takes into account a far more perfect set of circumstances and conditions than we can understand. But just as that excuses me not at all, we should be hesitant to assume that we can apply God's judgment to anyone. Even when the teachings of the scriptures seem to apply clearly to a given situation, we should always realize that we do not have God's knowledge, and we cannot assume we know what the final judgment will be. Justice and mercy are perfectly matched through the atonement of Jesus Christ.

I am grateful for the plan of salvation. I know that salvation is in Jesus Christ, no matter my understanding of the mechanisms involved. I know that if we truly love Christ and seek to do his will his grace is sufficient for us, that we may become perfect in him and receive an eternal weight of glory.