

Where There Is No Law

Wherefore, he has given a law; and where there is no law given there is no punishment; and where there is no punishment there is no condemnation; and where there is no condemnation the mercies of the Holy One of Israel have claim upon them, because of the atonement; for they are delivered by the power of him. For the atonement satisfieth the demands of his justice upon all those who have not the law given to them, that they are delivered from that awful monster, death and hell, and the devil, and the lake of fire and brimstone, which is endless torment; and they are restored to that God who gave them breath, which is the Holy One of Israel.

2 Nephi 9:25, 26

This argument has always made perfect sense to me as far as I understood it – people should not be judged according to a law they do not know. The part I had always “left on the shelf”¹ was about what this means for the billions of people who have lived on the earth without the gospel – perhaps even when the gospel was not found on the earth. Should they be held accountable to the same standard I am? Of course not. But do these verses mean they get a free pass to salvation? It seems unlikely. I had thought that they are accountable for such law as they had, but I still harbored a doubt that said that most of God's children had pretty much wasted their second estate.

This evening during the prayer meeting before my shift at the temple the counselor in the presidency who was speaking touched on this subject. As he spoke, I started to get a clearer understanding of the whole principle. Now that I have it I can't say it is a huge step beyond what I had before, but it was clear at the time that it was a personal revelation, designed to help me with something I have not understood.

Indeed, the key is that each individual must live up to the law he or she has – whatever it is. Just as my challenge in mortality is to live the gospel in a world that doesn't hold my views, so any person's challenge

¹ This phrase comes from a very close friend who talked with me once about aspects of the gospel he doesn't fully understand. He says there is a shelf at the back of his mind where he leaves such things. According to him, there is nothing wrong with pulling those things off the shelf from time to time to look at them, and even to consider whether he has gotten more understanding, but it would be stupid to clutch them close all the time, so if there is no immediate answer they go back on the shelf. Logically, if we have a testimony of the gospel then we have to adopt some course similar to this. We can't understand everything, but we know it is true.

is to live according to whatever light they have, in spite of whatever opposition they receive. The peasant in medieval Europe may have had little in common with me – merely surviving was a struggle – but he knew that survival was his lot, and the degree to which he worked to fulfill that responsibility determined his reward in the next life. Such a circumstance is very different from mine, but I look at members of my own ward who have to deal with unrighteousness of children, sickness, unemployment, and more, and I realize that they too have far different challenges than I do. Of course we each face our own individual trials. I just have to understand that the range of those individual circumstances is much broader than I had previously allowed.

So I picture a child, brought up on the streets of a modern city with no family, little formal education, and immersed in crime and all manner of debauchery. If that child lives according to whatever light he has – whether it is loyalty to friends, protecting other street children, or just not committing violence when robbing someone – when he dies and returns to meet the Holy One of Israel, through the infinite atonement he too will hear the words “Come unto me, my beloved child – enter into the rest of your Lord.”