

I consider Alma 42 one of the best chapters in all of holy writ on the doctrines of the plan of salvation. Unfortunately, Alma the Younger's wording can be difficult to unravel. So please forgive my attempts at explaining in modern English the doctrines he references in these verses. If you ever thought Alma waxed verbose (wordy), wait til you see what I'm capable of!

The verses, copied directly from the scriptures, are on the left. My commentary on those verses comprise the material in blue on the right.

Background

Corianton is one of the three sons of Alma the Younger who have gone on a mission to reclaim the Zoramites. The older sons have been faithful to their calling as missionaries, but Corianton has strayed. He has set a bad example for the people, causing them to disbelieve the words of Alma and Corianton's missionary companions. He has also gone after a harlot. Alma chapter 42 is only one of several chapters dedicated to the reclamation of his son, Corianton. As far as we can tell after reading his father's letters to him Corianton became a faithful missionary and completed the work he had been called to perform among the Zoramites.



1 And now, my son, I perceive there is somewhat more which doth worry your mind, which ye cannot understand—which is concerning the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner; for ye do try to suppose that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery.

This verse opened a window to my soul the first time I realized what it was saying. Like Corianton, I have no problem with the righteous being rewarded for eternity for their goodness. But, also like Corianton, for some reason the thought of someone being punished for eternity for their wickedness bothered me. Why is it okay to reward the righteous with an eternal reward, but not the wicked? How can it be unjust of God to give the wicked the same kind of reward he gives the righteous?

2 Now behold, my son, I will explain this thing unto thee. For behold, after the Lord God sent our first parents forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground, from whence they were taken—yea, he drew out the man, and he placed at the east end of the garden of Eden, cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the tree of life—

In order to understand the answer to these questions, Alma needs to start back at the beginning of the plan of salvation in mortality and work his way forward, explaining the doctrines that govern eternal rewards and punishments.

Mortality began with the eating of the forbidden fruit. Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden of Eden, and the tree of life was protected by a cherubim and a flaming sword. This was to prevent Adam and Eve from eating from this tree also. Eating from the tree of life would have allowed them to live forever in their current condition.

While Adam and Eve were immortal and innocent, they could eat from the tree of life all they wanted. But once they had partaken of the forbidden fruit, eating from the tree of life would have frustrated or negated the entire plan of salvation God prepared for his children. Hence the need to protect the tree from Adam and Eve.

3 Now, we see that the man had become as God, knowing good and evil; and lest he should put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat and live forever, the Lord God placed cherubim and the flaming sword, that he should not partake of the fruit—

4 And thus we see, that there was a time granted unto man to repent, yea, a probationary time, a time to repent and serve God.

5 For behold, if Adam had put forth his hand immediately, and partaken of the tree of life, he would have lived forever, according to the word of God, having no space for repentance; yea, and also the word of God would have been void, and the great plan of salvation would have been frustrated.

6 But behold, it was appointed unto man to die—therefore, as they were cut off from the tree of life they should be cut off from the face of the earth—and man became lost forever, yea, they became fallen man.

7 And now, ye see by this that our first parents were cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord; and thus we see they became subjects to follow after their own will.

Knowing good from evil, being able to comprehend in a real way the difference between the two was one of the main results of eating the forbidden fruit. Up to this time Adam and Eve were as innocent as little children, and were not able to comprehend evil, rebellion, selfishness, etc. They were obedient and pliable to the Lord's will, and delighted to serve him.

Eating that which the Lord had forbidden resulted in a fall from God's grace. They experienced a spiritual death. Death is defined as a separation. In this case death is two fold. They were cast out of the garden, out of God's presence, so they died spiritually, and they were no longer immortal, which meant they would die a physical death, the separation of their body from their immortal spirit.

This time in mortality we experience between birth and death becomes a time of proving, a time of probation. This was part of God's plan from the beginning. This time in mortality is essential to our progress to become more like Him.

The key to the state of mortal man is that we are already cut off from the presence of God, so we have become free agents, able to act for ourselves. In essence we are already damned, stopped in our eternal progression, because we have been cut off from the source of our advancement, God.

We have been granted a short space of time to change our natures and become more like God through repenting. God promised us this trial period in which his grace would be extended to us to help bring us back home, but there are conditions attached.

Because Adam and Eve became mortal, destined to die, their children and all their posterity were born into this same condition. We are all going to die. None of us can eat from the tree of life and live forever. We are not only fallen physically from immortal to mortal, but we are also fallen spiritually, from a state of innocence and grace to a mortal nature that follows the desires of the physical bodies which we currently inhabit.

Our moral agency has been kicked into full use precisely because we have been cut off from the presence of God both spiritually and physically. Because we are already damned, or stopped in our progress, we are free to make any moral choice we want. As part of God's mercy toward us he has promised that we will not be punished for our sins (disobedience) right away. At some point in the future we will have to stand before him and answer for our behavior in mortality, but not yet. For now we are given as many chances to repent and change as we need.

Despite our experience in mortality, each of us will have the opportunity to accept the sacrifice and doctrines of God's Son, Jesus Christ before our day of judgment. No one will be short-changed.

Since God cannot tolerate sin (disobedience) with the least degree of allowance, our proving ground had to be out of his presence. And since we kept our first estate, whatever that entailed, God had promised that we would be enlarged with a resurrected body, like his own. Now whether that was with all the glory of his body or with a much lesser glory, that would depend on our willingness to obey his commandments while here in mortality.

To make our choices truly our own, our memories of our Father in Heaven and our heavenly home had to be hidden from us for a time. This put each of us in a true middle ground from which we could then move in any direction we wished. We are provided with two voices, each attempting to entice us to follow them. One is God's voice, and the other is the enemy to all righteousness, Satan. We choose whose voice we find more pleasing and desirable.

This verse says that it was not expedient (proper under the circumstances) to be reclaimed from our physical death. We need this probationary state, this time in mortality, so we can make mistakes, repent, and grow into the righteous beings we are intended to become.

It was far more important to God that we first be reclaimed from our spiritual death than that we be reclaimed from our physical death. By helping us heal our separation from God (our spiritual death), it gives the healing of the separation of our body and spirit meaning later on. What good would it do to be resurrected, but still be damned because we are still hopelessly separated from God? This way, by spending our brief time in mortality improving ourselves and drawing closer to God, when we finally get our resurrection we can be ready to walk back into our Father's presence clean from the stains of sin. Brilliant plan!

By first giving us a way to come back into God's presence through repentance, our final resurrection to a state of glory becomes a reality, not just a pipe dream.

It is almost funny that the Lord refers to this experience in mortality as part of a plan of happiness. Sometimes life can be anything but happy. But if we look at life as a testing and as a trial period for the eternities to come then the things we learn from what we suffer in this life can indeed be part of a larger plan for our happiness.

The soul here refers to the spirit only. Our spirits are co-eternal with God, they never die. No matter what happens to us we will always exist. But putting our spirit into a body then cutting that body off from the presence of God brought a double death, the immediate spiritual death (because the separation was caused by sin/transgression), as well as the eventual physical death, because our bodies are mortal and will all die.

8 Now behold, it was not expedient that man should be reclaimed from this temporal death, for that would destroy the great plan of happiness.

9 Therefore, as the soul could never die, and the fall had brought upon all mankind a spiritual death as well as a temporal, that is, they were cut off from the presence of the Lord, it was expedient that mankind should be reclaimed from this spiritual death.

10 Therefore, as they had become carnal, sensual, and devilish, by nature, this probationary state became a state for them to prepare; it became a preparatory state.

11 And now remember, my son, if it were not for the plan of redemption, (laying it aside) as soon as they were dead their souls were miserable, being cut off from the presence of the Lord.

12 And now, there was no means to reclaim men from this fallen state, which man had brought upon himself because of his own disobedience;

One of the important aspects of mortality we need to understand is that when we are in a physical body, what affects the body also affects the spirit within that body. That which affects the spirit also affects that spirit's physical body. They have become one unit, even though only temporarily joined for now.

The most important reclamation from these two deaths is that of reclaiming us from our spiritual death. As long as we are separated from God there is no happiness in this life or in any life to come after mortality. So with or without a mortal body, it is crucial that we be reclaimed from our spiritual separation from God.

Adam and Eve were obedient and faithful children of God. But when they became mortal, all the desires of the flesh began to push for dominance over their natural inclinations to be obedient to God.

Mortals are lovers of pleasure, and comfort; they are sensual and selfish. This is the natural state of the human body. Human bodies crave pleasure and avoid pain, but can be taught to love pain in many forms. It is pliable. This is what we are all saddled with here in mortality. We must learn to recognize that this is the universal lot of humanity, and we each need to subdue our natural instincts and put them in submission to God's will. This is a big part of our probationary responsibilities.

As Alma says, let's lay aside the redemption of Christ, his atoning sacrifice for a moment. What would happen to us at the time of death? Well, without the redemption Christ offers us we would remain as spirits, still cut off from the presence of God forever.

While we are cut off from the presence of God, and especially without a body, we cannot progress, for we need a body to do that. Remember that the purpose of mortality was to both gain a physical body like God had and learn to control it so we could progress to become like him someday.

Without a mortal body we would be in the same position as Satan and his hosts. We would become like them and be ruled over for eternity by Satan, who has been given those who chose to go through eternity without bodies. We would indeed be miserable.

Mankind cannot fix this dilemma of being cut off from the presence of God. We are all fallen and can never return to his presence by any act or effort of our own. And this all happened because of our own disobedience.

We can't blame Adam and Eve for humanity's current condition. Each of us is incapable of living a perfect life, so we can't say this is their fault. They were the first to disobey, to transgress, but most of us have done far worse than they ever did.

13 Therefore, according to justice, the plan of redemption could not be brought about, only on conditions of repentance of men in this probationary state, yea, this preparatory state; for except it were for these conditions, mercy could not take effect except it should destroy the work of justice. Now the work of justice could not be destroyed; if so, God would cease to be God.

14 And thus we see that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice; yea, the justice of God, which consigned them forever to be cut off from his presence.

15 And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also.

Remember, we asked for this mortal experience. We wanted mortality more than anything. This road through mortality is our only path to becoming like God, our Father. But we are imperfect creatures, and cannot, of ourselves measure up to the task of being godly.

In order to maintain justice, the only way for us to be redeemed from our fallen and imperfect state is through repentance, turning to God and putting off the condition of our fallen natures, or the natural man, while in the time of our mortal probation. This is why it is so important for us to take the gospel of Christ so seriously in this life.

If we don't repent during the time the way to repent is open for us, mercy cannot take effect in our lives and we cannot be forgiven for our sins. God is infinitely merciful, but we only have between birth and the day of judgment to accept his mercy that is offered through the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

We don't know when the day of judgment will be, and we don't know when we will die, it is therefore imperative that we take advantage of our short time in mortality to do all we can to turn to God (repent), since repentance is so much more difficult once we leave mortality.

Without the mercy of God offered to us through Christ, we are all doomed to be condemned because of our sinful nature, that nature we longed for in the premortal world. We were willing to risk everything to come here to prove we could put off the natural man and become new creatures in Christ. This is what the gospel of Christ offers us.

How does this work? God's plan of mercy could only be offered if someone was able to satisfy the laws of justice in such a way that the cumulative disobedience of all God's children could be forgiven for eternity. None of us can even answer for our own disobedience, let alone for the misconduct of all the billions and billions of God's children.

Only God could make the payment required. Hence the need for the Son of God to come to earth and appease the demands of justice. By offering himself as a ransom to the demands of justice, being personally perfect and unblemished by sin, he was, in some miraculous way to us, able to satisfy the demands of God's laws.

Because Christ was able to satisfy the demands of God's laws, he was able to, in turn, offer us a window of opportunity for change. This window of opportunity is the mercy he offers us. The conditions are that we turn to him (repent) and forsake our earthly natures by keeping his commandments, the laws of happiness he gave the prophets to teach us.

We cannot expect mercy to be offered under any conditions, except through repentance. That would destroy or rob justice of what it is owed, and to do that God would cease to be God.

Father in Heaven is the great administrator of justice in the universe. His mercy is offered to us through the work Christ has done for us. But that mercy can only be extended to us for only so long before justice must be satisfied.

Eternal law says that only when we choose to learn to live by God's laws is he able to change our heart, our mortal nature, and help us overcome that which is natural within our earthly bodies, allowing us to become worthy of a celestial, godly life. God can only make these changes as fast as we choose to become obedient to him.

It is in verse 16 that Alma begins to answer Corianton's concerns about eternal rewards. He first had to give Corianton the doctrinal background for him to understand why things work the way they do.

Just as all of God's laws are eternal, any law regarding the disposition of his children's eternal souls must also be eternal in duration. So laws were given which have both rewards and punishments affixed to them. The laws, and their consequences are as eternal as the life of the souls they affect.

Note that repentance is not needed if there is no punishment for behavior. But since there is both punishment and reward for the behavior we choose, repentance is needed, for the punishment for disobedience is just as eternal in its nature as the reward for obedience.

Remember that we are eternal beings. Any changes we make to the condition of our soul must be as lasting as the soul (spirit and body) itself. If not then whatever reward is given would have to be requalified for over and over again throughout the eternities. That's no way to conduct business. God's laws offer us a permanent solution to a happy life in the eternities.

It is the natural man, our human nature because of our bodies, to sin, to be selfish, lustful, and to do things that are contrary to the nature of happiness. To become godly in our natures we must repent of our human nature and become more like God. So repentance is a necessary part of our lives, as sin is an inevitable part of our lives.

Guilt comes to us as a gift from God to let us know when we have violated a law of happiness. All mankind has the light of Christ within them, a conscience. Remorse for wrong doing is a good thing, for it is meant to lead us to repentance and a change in how we live so we experience that happiness that can only come from living the kind of life God lives.

We have been promised by God that we are only held accountable for the laws we know about. But if we deliberately choose to remain ignorant, we will be damned.

16 Now, repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment, which also was eternal as the life of the soul should be, affixed opposite to the plan of happiness, which was as eternal also as the life of the soul.

17 Now, how could a man repent except he should sin? How could he sin if there was no law? How could there be a law save there was a punishment?

18 Now, there was a punishment affixed, and a just law given, which brought remorse of conscience unto man.

19 Now, if there was no law given—if a man murdered he should die—would he be afraid he would die if he should murder?

20 And also, if there was no law given against sin men would not be afraid to sin.

21 And if there was no law given, if men sinned what could justice do, or mercy either, for they would have no claim upon the creature?

22 But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth; otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God.

23 But God ceaseth not to be God, and mercy claimeth the penitent, and mercy cometh because of the atonement; and the atonement bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead; and the resurrection of the dead bringeth back men into the presence of God; and thus they are restored into his presence, to be judged according to their works, according to the law and justice.

Alma's example law is the law against murder. If there is no law against murder then murder cannot be punished, for there was no law against doing it.

So it is with sin in general. If God had not made laws that require us to remain obedient to the commandments by which he lives, we could be disobedient to those laws all day long and he couldn't do anything about it.

Justice and mercy depend upon laws. Without eternal laws justice cannot condemn or reward us. Without eternal laws mercy could not be offered to us by Christ first satisfying the requirements of those laws.

Alma proclaims to Corianton that God has given us laws, and therefore we are going to be held accountable to those laws. We will either be rewarded for obeying those laws or we will be punished for not obeying them.

Because of Christ we each have a window of opportunity to repent. This is the mercy of God that offers sinners a way to remain mortal, yet not yet condemned while we learn to be more perfect. This is the greatness of Christ's sacrifice for us. Without Christ's extended mercy during this life, we would be left to suffer the full consequences of our sins. We cannot expect otherwise, for that would require that God cease to be God.

But God never does anything that is contrary to his own nature, which is perfection, ruled by love. Christ's atonement offers us a period of mercy so we can repent. His atonement includes the resurrection from the dead for all of humanity.

Remember, the reason we came down here was to get a body so we could someday be like God, our Father. That is the whole point of earth life. If we came down here and got a body, only to die and leave that body to molder in the dust for eternity, there would have been no point to mortality.

In order to return to God for judgment, we had been promised in our premortal life that by keeping our first estate (another term for our premortal life) we would be added upon, which means we would receive a resurrected body.

The resurrection brings with it a judgment for what we did with our lives in mortality. Our judgment is based on the laws of justice, which takes into consideration the mercy we were willing to accept to be forgiven of our sins.

The quality or capacity of that resurrected body depends on our willingness to repent and obey God's commandments. So the gift of the resurrection is an award we have all earned by keeping our first estate. This was a big part of what Christ accomplished as part of his atonement for our sins.

24 For behold, justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own; and thus, none but the truly penitent are saved.

25 What, do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you, Nay; not one whit. If so, God would cease to be God.

26 And thus God bringeth about his great and eternal purposes, which were prepared from the foundation of the world. And thus cometh about the salvation and the redemption of men, and also their destruction and misery.

27 Therefore, O my son, whosoever will come may come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds.

28 If he has desired to do evil, and has not repented in his days, behold, evil shall be done unto him, according to the restoration of God.

Our judgment is based on justice. But mercy cannot be robbed either. Those who accept the mercy offered by Christ through repentance of their sins, are forgiven of those sins. Those forgiven of their sins cannot be condemned by justice, for the law has been satisfied through their repentance. Hence, "none but the truly penitent are saved."

Just as mercy cannot rob the demands of justice, so justice cannot rob the law of mercy.

This is the plan of salvation. God set up laws to govern all things. We either live by those laws or we are punished for our disobedience. Christ sacrificed himself to pay for the sins we commit. Because he was innocent he was able to pay the eternal consequence of the sins of all mankind. He, and he alone, can offer us mercy, a chance to repent and change, a chance to become better today than we were yesterday, a chance to become godly.

Only those who repent, utilizing Christ's atonement can be saved in the kingdom of God, for repentance makes us more godly.

The eternal nature of the judgment we will receive is designed to last as long as the life of the soul being judged. Since we are eternal, so too is the duration of the judgment. That judgment will either be to eternal happiness or eternal misery, to eternal progression, or to eternal damnation (to be stopped in our progress, like a dam stops the flow of water).

We need to remember that none of this would be possible had not God given us our moral agency and held it sacred. No one, and nothing can interfere with our ability to make our own choices, until the day of judgment. At that time we will be held accountable for all our choices.

So really, whether we are rewarded with eternal progress and happiness or rewarded with eternal damnation, is all up to us. We choose how to behave and what we do each day. If we are damned in the end, it will be by our own choosing.

One of the chapters in Alma's letter to Corianton talks extensively about the restoration of God. Whatever we choose in the days of our probation will be restored or given back to us in the day of judgment. If we desire evil all the days of our lives then evil will be restored to us in the day of judgment in the form of a condemnation and an assignment to a lower kingdom of glory.

Likewise, if we desire righteousness all the days of our lives, we will have righteousness restored or returned to us again in the day of judgment. We will be given eternal glory and eternal progression. We will live with God and Christ and become gods ourselves. This is the restoration of God.

29 And now, my son, I desire that ye should let these things trouble you no more, and only let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance.

Alma finishes his letter to his son with counsel that is good for all of us. Don't worry about what you don't understand. Focus for now on repenting.

30 O my son, I desire that ye should deny the justice of God no more. Do not endeavor to excuse yourself in the least point because of your sins, by denying the justice of God; but do you let the justice of God, and his mercy, and his long-suffering have full sway in your heart; and let it bring you down to the dust in humility.

Don't deny the justice of God. Don't excuse any of your sins as unimportant, for this just denies the justice of God, and denies Christ's mercy. God is long-suffering and patient. Use that patience to repent all the days of your life. Be humble. This way God's mercy will be your claim, and not his justice.

31 And now, O my son, ye are called of God to preach the word unto this people. And now, my son, go thy way, declare the word with truth and soberness, that thou mayest bring souls unto repentance, that the great plan of mercy may have claim upon them. And may God grant unto you even according to my words. Amen.