

Reflections on the Sacrament Prayers

By John S. Tanner

What are the scriptural verses most familiar to members of the Church? Moroni 10:4 [Moro. 10:4]? James 1:5? Without doubt they are Moroni 4:3 [Moro. 4:3], 5:2 [Moro. 5:2], and D&C 20:77, 79—the verses containing the sacrament prayers. Whatever other scriptures we may read during the week, we are sure to hear these every Sunday, week in and week out. Before the consolidated meeting schedule, we heard them twice on Sunday. I estimate I have heard them over 3,300 times.

The sacrament prayers are among the very few set prayers the Lord has revealed. He obviously wants his people to ponder their sacred words regularly. Yet we often hear them without really listening to their richly evocative words. Their very familiarity may breed complacency.

To counter this tendency, I recently set about to study the structure of the prayers and then to contemplate their meaning, phrase by phrase. Perhaps my reflections may help your sacrament worship, as it has mine.

The structure of the prayers is elegantly simple. Framed by the invocation and benediction, the body of each comprises three logical parts. First, the prayer consecrates the emblem and explains its significance. Second, it stipulates our part of the covenant. Third, it reveals the Lord's part of the covenant, his gracious promise of his Spirit.

Notice that these three parts seem to be structured chronologically. We bless the emblems in order to *remember* the great events of our Lord's atonement; this draws our minds to great events in the past. Then we *witness* our willingness to live his gospel; this focuses our attention on the present. Finally, the Lord *promises* us his Spirit if we live up to our witness; this might summon our hope for future blessings. So in order to focus my sacrament devotions, I sometimes structure my meditations according to this chronological sequence: remembering, witnessing, hoping.

Commentary on the Sacrament Prayers

I have reaped a rich spiritual harvest by reviewing the prayers phrase by phrase, pondering the significance of each line, lingering over important words.

1. "O God, the Eternal Father"

So begin both prayers. Both prayers mention God twice, in each instance reminding us of his eternal fatherhood. In concentrating on the Savior's magnificent personal sacrifice, I have often overlooked the fact that God, as the Father, shared intimately in the cost of the Atonement. Elder Melvin J. Ballard described the agony of a divine Parent witnessing the suffering he could have prevented his Son from experiencing:

"God heard the cry of His Son in that moment of great grief and agony, in the garden when the pores of His body opened and drops of blood stood upon Him, and He cried out: 'Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me.'

"I ask you, what father and mother could stand by and listen to the cry of their children in distress, in this world, and not

render assistance? ...

“I think I can see our dear Father behind the veil looking upon these dying struggles until even He could not endure it any longer; and, like the mother who bids farewell to her dying child and has to be taken out of the room so as not to look upon the last struggles, so He bowed His head and hid in some part of His universe, His great heart almost breaking for the love He had for His Son. Oh, in that moment when He might have saved His Son, I thank and praise Him that He did not fail us, for He had not only the love of His Son in mind, but He also had love for us.” (*Melvin J. Ballard, Crusader for Righteousness*, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966, pp. 136–37.)

It is fitting, then, that the sacrament prayers remind us that our God is also a father and that his sacrifice was essential to the Atonement.

2. “We ask thee”

We ask thee. The sacrament is communal. We partake of it along with others who are united with us by shared baptismal covenants and by the mutual need to repent and recommit. To partake of the sacrament is to formally participate in fellowship with the Saints.

President David O. McKay described this bond of fellowship:

“In the early establishment of the Church of Jesus Christ the brethren met, we are told, often at daybreak, to partake of this sacrament as in the bond of brotherhood, of oneness. The element of brotherhood has been associated with it always. I remember when I was a boy that there was emphasized much more than we hear emphasized now the necessity of no one’s partaking of the sacrament who had ill feelings toward another, and I have heard more than one man say: ‘I am sorry that I hurt Brother so-and-so’s feelings, and I ask his forgiveness.’ He felt it necessary to do so before he was worthy to partake of the sacrament.

“We meet in the brotherhood of Christ, all on the same level, each expressing confidence in the other and all in one another.” (*Improvement Era*, Jan. 1953, pp. 13–14.)

Many scriptures likewise admonish us to become reconciled with our fellow Saints in order to more fully enjoy this sweet fellowship and communion. “If any have trespassed, let him not partake until he makes reconciliation.” (D&C 46:4; see also 1 Cor. 10:21; 3 Ne. 18:28–29; D&C 20:68–69.) Reminding us weekly of our need to foster charity toward our fellow Saints, the sacrament can be a great force for unity in our congregations. United under the plural pronoun, we *all* equally need the Lord’s Spirit and pardon: “we ask thee.”

3. “In the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ”

Since Father Adam first offered sacrifice, we have been instructed to do all things in the name of the Son: “Wherefore, thou shalt do all that thou doest in the name of the Son,” the angel instructs Adam, “and thou shalt repent and call upon God in the name of the Son forevermore.” (Moses 5:8.)

We petition the Father in the name of the Son because he is our Advocate with the Father. The sacrament often calls to my mind Christ’s intercessory pleading with the Father for us:

“Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified;

“Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life.” (D&C 45:4–5.)

These words, so stunningly intimate, might well refresh the frequently formulaic endings of all our prayers. In the sacrament prayers, supplicating the Father “in the name of thy Son” takes on even deeper significance.

4. “To bless and sanctify this bread [water] to the souls of all those who partake [drink] of it”

The bread reminds us of His body. As I partake of the bread, I remember the *physical* suffering of our Lord. I recall the barbs of the scourge on his back, the bite of the thorns on his brow. I recollect the weight of the cross which he dragged through the dusty streets, his labored journey to Golgotha, the place of a skull. I think about nails, about the tearing thud as the cross was dropped into place, about the cruel crucifixion which allowed the victim no relief as he shifted his weight back and forth from feet to arms. And finally, I remember that all this pain was voluntary, for either our Redeemer or the Father could have put a stop to it at any time.

The water reminds us of His spilt blood. As I drink from the cup, I remember the *spiritual* anguish of the Lord as he somehow took upon himself our sins. I remember Gethsemane, where blood issued forth from every pore, so great was his agony and his compassion. (See Mosiah 3:7; Luke 22:44; D&C 19:16–19.)

The bread is blessed to the good of our souls; it is to feed our spirits. All of us make mistakes each week that sap our spiritual vitality. But when we approach the sacrament hungering and thirsting for righteousness, fervently desiring to recommit ourselves to God, we will be filled. Elder Melvin J. Ballard testified:

“There is a spirit attending the administration of the sacrament that warms the soul from head to foot; you feel the wounds of the spirit being healed, and the load being lifted.” (Ballard, p. 133.)

Truly the bread and water may feed the *souls* of all those who partake worthily of them; they are blessed and sanctified to this end.

5. “That they may eat [do it] in remembrance of the body [blood]”

We partake of the sacrament in *remembrance*. The sacrament is a memorial, not a reenactment. The emblems of the Atonement are not magically transformed into body and blood, as many believe. When I recollect the great turmoil that this single point has caused, the countless thousands who have been persecuted and even killed for believing one way or another about it, how grateful I am for the unambiguous clarity of our revealed sacrament prayers. These emblems *represent* the Lord’s body and blood, and so we come to *remember*.

6. “And witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing”

Yet we come not merely to remember what is past. We come also to resolve for the present and future—to witness. What does it mean to be a witness? I often remember a scene in Robert Bolt’s play about Thomas More, *A Man for All Seasons*. More’s daughter Margaret visits him in jail, trying to persuade him to take an oath he believes to be sacrilegious, in order to secure

his freedom: “Say the words of the oath,” Meg argues, “and in your heart think otherwise.”

“What is an oath then,” responds More, “but words we say to God? When a man takes an oath, Meg, he’s holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he open his fingers *then*—he needn’t hope to find himself again. Some men aren’t capable of this, but I’d be loathe to think your father one of them.” (New York: Vintage Books, 1962, p. 81.)

It is a serious thing to become a witness, to say solemn words to God. To do so casually or without real intent is to jeopardize our power to make and keep any promises, even those most crucial of promises—those made to ourselves alone.

We further state in the prayer on the bread that we are *willing*. I pause over this powerful word: to do something willingly is to do it gladly, freely, obediently, whole-heartedly, without compulsion or reservation. This promise I make of my own free will, and do it cheerfully, willingly.

7. “To take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him, and keep his commandments”

In the prayer upon the bread we recommit to take upon ourselves the Lord’s name—an agreement we first make at baptism. (See D&C 20:37.) What a privilege to bear the name of Christ, and what a trust! President George Albert Smith recounted a dream he had about meeting in the spirit world his grandfather, George A. Smith, a mighty man of the Church. “I would like to know what you have done with my name,” he said to his grandson. “Everything I had ever done passed before me as though it were a flying picture,” recalls President Smith. After this rapid retrospective, President Smith smiled, looked at his grandfather, and said: “I have never done anything with your name of which you need be ashamed.” Then George A. Smith stepped forward, took his namesake in his big arms, and embraced him. “[A]s he did so, I became conscious again of my earthly surroundings. My pillow was ... wet with tears of gratitude that I could answer unashamed.” (*Improvement Era*, Mar. 1947, p. 139.)

We who have taken upon ourselves the name of Christ, first at baptism and then weekly with the sacrament, may also be worthy to be embraced by the Lord. But first we will have to make an accounting of what we have done with his name, the only name under heaven through which salvation comes.

We honor this name by *keeping his commandments*. But which commandments? At first, I think of the questions asked of me during a temple recommend interview. But soon I get to the even more searching great commandments: Am I truly loving man and God with all my heart and strength? “If a man love me,” Jesus said, “he will keep my words.” (John 14:23.) I believe this to be as much a statement of simple fact as it is an injunction. Those who love the Lord *do* keep his commandments.

Yet no matter how inspiring our Sabbath, come Monday morning, the cares of the world quickly press upon us. I suppose, then, it is precisely because the Lord understands our human tendency to forget that he invites us to partake of the sacrament weekly. The commandment is adjusted, as is the Word of Wisdom, to the capacity of the weak. (See D&C 89:3.)

Still, the divine imperative remains: to always *remember*. As we pursue normal weekday activities, with our conscious minds we must inevitably think of many things other than the Atonement (and this is proper; our faith does not idealize monastic and cloistered virtue). Therefore, if we are to *always* remember the Lord, we must remember him not simply with our waking consciousness, but also with our unconscious. His law must be written not only in our minds but on the “fleshy tables of the heart.” (2 Cor. 3:3.) The sacrament invites us to fix our whole souls upon the Lord and his righteousness.

8. “That they may always have his Spirit to be with them.”

If we covenant to *always* remember, the Lord promises, reciprocally, to *always* bless us with his Spirit. What a heavenly gift! Just how crucial it is to have the Spirit with us we may judge by the times when we have not felt the Spirit in our lives, or by the scriptural record of the Savior on the cross when he cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46.)

As an aid to our memory (see John 14:26), the Holy Spirit can help us fulfill the very condition upon which his presence depends: that we always remember. There is a marvelous spiritual synergism in the economy of heaven: the more we strive to do right, the more we are blessed to do it; the more we have, the more we are given; the more we try to remember, the more the Lord makes available to us that being whose calling it is to “bring all things to your remembrance.”

9. “Amen.”

This word is our solemn seal. We say it in unison, further bringing us together as a community of believers. We ought to say “amen” having listened carefully and with full intent to these marvelous prayers, for by this word we formally affix our approval.

To partake of the sacrament is to engage in an intimate fellowship not just with the Saints, but with the Lord himself. In modern revelation, the Lord has foretold of a great gathering of the righteous at which he will once again partake of the sacrament. Gathered there will be Moroni, Elias, John the Baptist, Elijah, Joseph who was sold into Egypt, Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, Adam, Peter, James, and John, as well as “all those whom my Father hath given me out of the world.” (D&C 27:14.) May we partake of the sacrament worthily now so that we may be among those blessed faithful, to be received with gladness back into the arms of him whose name we have honored.

Let’s Talk about It

After reading “Reflections on the Sacrament Prayers,” individually or as a family, you may want to consider the following questions and ideas.

1. What attitudes can we develop to increase the bond of fellowship that ought to be part of sacrament worship?
2. How does the sacrament remind us of the Father’s love, as well as of the Son’s?
3. What difference should it make for us to take upon ourselves the Lord’s name? How can we honor the Lord’s name?
4. What does a person need to do to take advantage of the blessings extended to those who partake of the sacrament?
5. As a family or individually, prepare to receive the sacrament this next Sunday by discussing before sacrament meeting the commitments we make during the prayers and the promises our Heavenly Father extends to us as we keep those commitments. Then reflect on those commitments and promises during the administration of the sacrament.

[photos] Photography by Marty Mayo

[illustration] “Christ in Gethsemane,” by Harry Anderson

[illustration] “The Crucifixion,” by Harry Anderson

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