

# “Come Ye Disconsolate”: Is There a Mercy Seat in Mormon Theology and Practice?

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Angels above us are silent notes taking of every action.

I the Lord God cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance.

Come to the Mercy Seat, fervently kneel.

AT AGE SIXTY-EIGHT I HAVE LIVED long enough to know some of the sorrows of this life. More than once I have cried out with the Psalmist: “Out of the depths I cry unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!”

And I have noted that there are varieties of sorrow:

There is sorrow for sin and ways of dealing with it. The Mormon church has a fully developed method for this.

There is sorrow which comes “for Christ’s sake” as Paul talks so much about, that is being persecuted for proclaiming the gospel. Mormons have experienced this and have learned how to cope with it.

Then there is a kind of sorrow when bad things happen to good people or when a good person simply “crashes” as slang might have it, and one does not know why or what to do, when one wonders whether one has built on sand, whether one’s prayers clear the ceiling, let alone ascend to heaven, when one’s roots and heritage weaken, when one feels the Spirit has withdrawn and one is left to kick against the pricks. In my experience the Mormon church has not fully and properly addressed this type of sorrow.

At the Mormon History Association conference at Pomona College,

California, in 1991 I was experiencing this latter form of sorrow. I was languishing, I had a wounded heart, I was disconsolate and not at all sure why. I needed a temporary place of refuge. Then something special happened to me.

At our traditionally inspiring MHA conference Sunday morning devotional, directed by RLDS Barbara Howard, we sang (what I took to be) an RLDS hymn, "Come ye Disconsolate," the first verse of which is:

Come ye disconsolate where ere ye languish  
 Come to the *Mercy Seat*, fervently kneel  
 Bring here your wounded hearts  
 Tell of your anguish  
*There is no sorrow on earth which heaven cannot heal.*<sup>1</sup>

That one verse, especially the last line—"There is no sorrow on earth which heaven cannot heal"—was as Balm of Gilead to my wounded heart. I began to heal, I began to understand God as a God of love—not the scorekeeper I had turned him into, not a God as judgmental as I. For the first time in my life I listened, hearkened to the words, the assurance of a Mercy Seat. And even though I did not then know what the term Mercy Seat really meant, I sensed comfort.

The Mercy Seat is mentioned twenty-seven times in the Old Testament primarily in reference to the Arc of the Covenant in the Tabernacle as a resting place for God, but the term has come to have the secondary meanings of a place of expiation, condoning, cleansing, forgiveness, and pardoning. It is referred to only once in the New Testament (Heb. 8:5) with the meaning of an expiatory place or a place to make reconciliation and, by extension, perhaps a court of last resort or last appeal for those who, somehow, have fallen through the cracks and safety nets of traditional Mormonism, a place of compassion for sufferers.

To me it has become some kind of a place where at times in my anguish and with my wounded heart I longed to be able to throw myself on God's infinite mercy and unconditional love.

Since first hearing this hymn I have been searching the scriptures for further comfort and three times I found Paul's great promise of "Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Tim. 1:2, 2 Tim. 1:2, Titus 1:4) and Jude 2, "Mercy unto you, and peace, and love, be multiplied."

Since the Pomona conference I also found "Come Ye Disconsolate" in

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1. Italics supplied. The words are by the well known Irish Catholic poet and musician Thomas Moore. Barbara later told me she selected this hymn because she thought it to be an LDS hymn, which it is, but I did not know it at the time. It did not appear in the RLDS hymnal until about 1980.

the LDS hymn book, it has been there since at least 1909!—I had just never heard it sung in church. We don't think along these lines. In my experience such sentiments are not typical of Mormonism.

We work out our salvation in fear and trembling. We have guardian angels silent notes taking of every action (do what is right). Our God cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance, mercy cannot rob justice. As Alma said, "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" (42:13-26). Good, faithful Mormons often believe they should not have serious problems, and when serious problems appear they too often don't know what to do about them.

I had never fully realized what the Mercy Seat was or fully known a God of love. I had never known of total, unqualified love. This kind of Godly love, to me, somehow in the past always caused me to reflect on the teaching "Can mercy rob justice?"

I had never known the deeper meaning of Matthew 11:28-30:

Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden,  
And I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart,

And ye shall find rest unto your souls.  
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.<sup>2</sup>

Then I began to reflect on the famous passage of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The entire chapter six of John was comforting. And John 10:10 helped: "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."

I found little of comfort, however, in Restoration scripture. Our third Article of Faith makes our theological position quite clear in this matter: "We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, *by obedience* to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel."

A few scattered verses helped a bit. Doctrine and Covenants 38:14 says, "But now I tell it unto you, and ye are blessed . . . I will be merciful unto your weakness," and 50:16, "I will be merciful unto you; he that is weak among you hereafter shall be made strong." And Alma 34:16: "And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety."

Now I have no great quarrel with the rather hard-nosed Mormon version of the Mercy Seat, our qualified and limited understanding of grace and salvation, except it does not take into account the good person

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2. This always brings to mind the sublime aria in the *Messiah*—"Come unto me."

who occasionally falls through the cracks and temporarily "crashes." This hard-nosedness derives from the well-known Mormon emphasis on James, "Faith without works is dead," versus Paul, "For by grace ye are saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." I had heard God is love all my life, but it had never really registered.

Mormon theology is a manly, up-and-at-'em, dynamic working-out-our-salvation-in-fear-and-trembling, a we-are-surrounded-with-angels religion that teaches since birth that every unpleasant, un-Christian thought and action I have ever had has been recorded and will be revealed at the Bar of Judgment. The Mormon God is often more of the Old Testament than of the New.

Furthermore many of our hymns are also the up-and-at-'em, do-or-die types:

"I Have Work Enough to Do"  
 "We are Marching on to Glory"  
 "Improve the Shining Moments"  
 "Today, While the Sun Shines"  
 "Do What is Right"  
 "Choose the Right"  
 "Let Us All Press On"  
 "Up, Awake, Ye Defenders of Zion"  
 "Called to Serve"  
 "We Are All Enlisted"  
 "Behold! a Royal Army"  
 "Put Your Shoulder to the Wheel"  
 "Hope of Israel"  
 "Come, Come, Ye Saints"

There are, however, some comforting ones:

"Sweet is the Peace the Gospel Brings"  
 "The Lord is My Light"  
 "Dearest Children, God is Near You"  
 "Jesus, Lover of my Soul"  
 "Precious Saviour, Dear Redeemer"  
 "The Lord is My Shepherd"  
 "The Lord my Pasture Will Prepare"  
 "Cast Thy Burden upon the Lord"  
 "Rock of Ages"  
 "Come unto Jesus"  
 "Lean on My Ample Arm"  
 "How Gentle God's Commands"

"Where Can I Turn for Peace"  
 "Did You Think to Pray?"  
 "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee"  
 "Prayer is the Soul's Sincere Desire"  
 "Come Ye Disconsolate"

One of our favorite hymns, "I Stand All Amazed," one which we sing often as against the almost never heard "Come Ye Disconsolate," has recently become most comforting and meaningful to me, but, as a people, I don't think we understand it. I don't think we ever reflect on this hymn's reference to the Mercy Seat for I have never heard the term used in more than sixty years of church attendance.

### I Stand All Amazed

I stand all amazed as the love Jesus offers me  
 Confused at the *grace* which so fully he offers me  
 I tremble to know that for me he was crucified  
 That for me a sinner he suffered, he bled, and died.

Oh, it is wonderful that he should care for me enough to die for me  
 Oh, it is wonderful to me.

I think of his hands pierced and bleeding to pay the debt  
 Such love and devotion can I forget  
 No, no I will pray and adore at the *Mercy Seat*  
 Until at the glorified throne I kneel at his feet.<sup>3</sup>

Where do good Mormons go when they crash, when wounded, not by sin, but by the cares of life, when they feel their prayers do not clear the ceiling, when they have doubts, when they are not seeking absolution, not searching for short cuts or loop holes, rather searching for just a little unconditional love, understanding, and support, enough to get back to a more abundant life, when they just want to throw themselves on the mercy of the court?

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3. Words by Charles H. Gabriel (1856-1932), a nineteenth-twentieth-century prolific American composer, most likely Protestant, of gospel hymns. Although the words to this hymn were not written by a Mormon, one may assume that the philosophy, the doctrine of the words, is kosher. This is because all hymns are carefully screened before they enter the canon of the hymnal, and Mormons are not loath to alter some words in otherwise appropriate hymns if theologically necessary, as we have done at least seven times. Those altered include "How Great Thou Art," "God is Love," "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and "Joy to the World." We even add new verses and adapt music. A most interesting paper could be developed analyzing these changes in Mormon hymnody.

We can, of course, go to our bishop, but it is sometimes difficult for some Mormons to go to their bishops or stake presidents for they are extremely busy with the cares of the whole congregation. It is especially difficult for males holding the Melchizedek priesthood, for priesthood holders should be helping others, not taking up the limited time of the Father of the Ward who has the cares of all, especially of those who are not priesthood holders.

More significantly, Mormon bishops are "the common judges in Israel." They have great power to discipline. As one young, newly minted bishop once told me, "I can do it all—from baptism to excommunication"—and he was right. And as Paul Toscano recently wrote in *Sunstone*, "Directives require the [Mormon] bishop to act simultaneously in the conflicting role of police officer, accuser, prosecutor, and judge—all of which are at odds with his role as pastor."<sup>4</sup> A point to which I wish to return. I occasionally go to my various bishops and ask for a blessing to help me better cope. While this always helps, sometimes I need more, sometimes I want to talk to someone other than a judge.

Mormons may also talk to their home teachers, quorum leaders, and the sisters have visiting teachers. It has been my experience that many times these people, however well intentioned, have neither the time nor the skills to properly advise other than regarding the minor problems of life. Some of my quorum leaders have also been a bit uneasy when I tried to open up to them.

Home and visiting teachers, furthermore, are really representatives of the bishop and are expected to keep him advised regarding the welfare of church members, the major concern being the physical, not spiritual.

In Mormonism mercy is not "showered promiscuously" upon humankind, it is "granted" to those who comply with the law upon which its receipt is predicated<sup>5</sup>—"There is a law irrevocably decreed in the heavens upon which all blessings are predicated and when one receives such a blessing it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated" (D&C 130:20-21). It is earned by those who are God-fearing and righteous. And, as such, of little use, if available at all, to those who crash, to those who need it most, to those who do not feel righteous, but want to. To paraphrase Ann Landers, the Mormon church often appears to be more of a museum for saints than a hospital for sinners.

Grace, too, exists in Mormon theology, but it appears to be qualified: "Grace is granted to men proportionately as they conform to the standards of personal righteousness that are part of the gospel plan."<sup>6</sup> Mor-

4. "Dealing with Spiritual Abuse: The Role of the Mormon Alliance," *Sunstone*, July 1993, 32-39.

5. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1958), 438.

6. *Ibid.*, 310.

mons appear then to get grace when they really don't need it.

In LDS theology justice demands that for every broken law a penalty must be paid: "Mercy is thus for the repentant, faithful member of the church and no one else."<sup>7</sup> Good Mormons should not become disconsolate. If we do, we tend to think we, somehow, brought it upon ourselves.

Yet there is some hope. In 1993 general conference, for example, President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "Mercy is the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the reality of our discipleship to Christ is directly measured by how merciful we are." I memorize hymns, I am learning to pray to a God of love, and I am gaining more sympathy and understanding for others like myself. We Mormons should balance our theology—we should stress the Mercy Seat concept as much as the mercy—cannot—rob—justice principle.

It is easy to criticize, to complain. Do I have anything positive to say, any suggestions? Well, one maybe. In addition to the bishop, in addition to home teachers, visiting teachers, and quorum leaders, perhaps we need a trained and officially called assistant bishop to function like a pastor or minister, not as a judge, one to whom members may speak quite freely knowing that what they say or reveal will never be repeated under any circumstances to anyone, knowing that the assistant bishop cannot discipline them. He can only listen, offer council, understanding, comfort, and make suggestions—one of which might be to go and talk to the bishop.

In conclusion and to answer the question I have raised: Yes, there is a Mercy Seat in Mormon theology, a rather restricted one, qualified and conditional, based on worthiness and a doctrine little talked of. We need to pay more attention to it and what it means.

This will be the text of my sermon the next time I am asked to speak in church—if I am asked again.

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7. *Ibid.*, 440.