
Alma 42 — Mercy Cannot Rob Justice — Alma on the Plan of Redemption

Alma 42: c. 73 BC, the climax and conclusion of Alma's charge to Corianton, in Zarahemla. This is the doctrinal summit not only of the four-chapter charge but arguably of the entire Book of Mormon. Corianton's last and deepest worry was that it seemed unjust for a sinner to be consigned to misery — a worry that, left unanswered, becomes a quiet justification for sin. Alma answers it by laying out the whole architecture of redemption: the fall that cut man off from God and subjected him to death and to the demands of justice; the probationary state granted as space to repent; the law that makes sin, righteousness, and consequence possible; and the atonement of God Himself, which satisfies justice fully so that mercy can claim the penitent without robbing justice of a single demand. The chapter's most famous line — 'what, do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you, Nay; not one whit' — is the Book of Mormon's definitive statement of how a God who is perfectly just can also be perfectly merciful. It closes the charge by sending the now-instructed Corianton back to preach.

Alma 42 is the chapter the whole Corianton charge has been building toward. Alma had confronted his son's sin (39), taught him the resurrection (40), and corrected his confusion about restoration (41). But beneath all of it lay one final, deeper worry, and Alma names it at the outset: Corianton was troubled because it seemed *cruel* — a kind of injustice — that a sinner should be cut off and consigned to a state of misery (v. 1). This is the worry that secretly excuses sin, the suspicion that if God's punishments are unfair then they need not be feared. So Alma answers it with the most complete account of the plan of redemption anywhere in scripture. He shows that the punishment of sin is not cruelty but justice; that justice, left alone, would condemn every fallen soul; that mercy could not simply override justice without unmaking God; and that the atonement of God Himself is the one thing that satisfies justice in full so that mercy can rightfully claim the penitent. The chapter is the answer to the oldest religious question there is — how can God be both just and merciful at once? — and the Book of Mormon's answer, given by a father to a fallen son, is the atonement.

Hebrew Word Studies

kaphar / mishpat / chesed (כָּפַר / מִשְׁפָּט / חֶסֶד) — **to cover, to ransom, to make atonement, to reconcile / justice, judgment, the right ordering and rendering of what is due / steadfast love, covenant mercy, loyal kindness vv. 13–15, 23 / vv. 1, 14, 22–25 / vv. 23–25, 30.** The three words that govern this chapter are the three great words of biblical theology, and their interplay is the chapter's whole argument. *Kaphar* is the verb behind *atonement* — its root sense is *to cover*, and from it comes *kapporet*, the mercy seat, the cover of the ark where blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*, from the same root, Lev. 16). To *kaphar* is to cover sin, to wipe it, to provide the ransom-price that reconciles. When Alma says *God himself atoneth (kaphar) for the sins of the world* (v. 15), he means God Himself provides the covering, the ransom, the reconciling blood — and the staggering claim is that the High Priest and the sacrifice are one and the same Person. *Mishpat* is *justice* — not merely punishment but the right ordering of the world, the rendering to each of what is due; it is one of the things the Lord *delights in* (Jer. 9:24) and the foundation of His throne (Ps. 89:14). *Mishpat* is what holds the moral universe square. And *chesed* is *mercy* — but a particular kind: not soft sentiment but *covenant* love, the loyal, faithful kindness that keeps its promises to the undeserving. The Hebrew Bible's great refrain pairs the two: the Lord keeps *mishpat* and *chesed* together (Hos. 12:6; Mic. 6:8). The agony Corianton's question raises is that *mishpat* and *chesed* seem to pull against each other — justice demands the sinner pay, mercy longs to spare him. Alma's answer is that the *kaphar*, the atonement, is the one place where *mishpat* is fully satisfied and *chesed* is fully extended at once: justice gets its whole payment, and mercy gets her penitent, because the covering price was paid by God Himself. The throne founded on *mishpat* (Ps. 89:14) is the same throne before which *chesed* goes (Ps. 89:14b) — and the atonement is how both can stand without one robbing the other.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Gen. 3:22–24 (the cherubim and the flaming sword keeping the tree of life — vv. 2–6); Ex. 25:17–22; Lev. 16:1–34 (the mercy seat / kapporet and the Day of Atonement / kippur — the kaphar of v. 15); Deut. 30:19 (life and death set before man, choose life — the probation and choice of vv. 4, 27); Ps. 85:10 (mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other — the meeting of justice and mercy, v. 15); Ps. 89:14 (justice and judgment are the habitation of thy throne: mercy and truth shall go before thy face — the throne founded on both, vv. 15, 25); Isa. 53:5–11 (the chastisement of our peace was upon him... he shall bear their iniquities — the justice-satisfying atonement of v. 15); Mic. 6:8 (do justly, and to love mercy — the mishpat and chesed of the chapter); Hos. 6:6; 12:6 (mercy and judgment kept together); Rom. 3:23–26 (that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth — Paul's precise parallel to a just God, and a merciful God also, v. 15); Rom. 5:12–21 (the fall in Adam and the redemption in Christ — the structure of vv. 2–15); 2 Cor. 5:19–21 (God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself — God himself atoneth, v. 15); Heb. 2:9–17; 9:11–28 (Christ the High Priest who is also the sacrifice, entering with his own blood — the himself of v. 15); 1 Pet. 1:18–20 (redeemed by the blood of Christ, foreordained before the foundation of the world — v. 26); 2 Ne. 2:5–10 (Lehi: by the law no flesh is justified, and the Holy Messiah answereth the ends of the law — the parallel atonement doctrine); 2 Ne. 9:7–26 (Jacob: the infinite atonement, the monster death and hell, the demands of justice — the small-plates twin of Alma 42); Mosiah 2:38–39 (the demands of justice upon the unrepentant — v. 14); Mosiah 15:8–9 (Abinadi: Christ standeth betwixt them and justice... having satisfied the demands of justice — verbatim doctrine of v. 15); Alma 34:8–16 (Amulek's infinite and eternal atonement that overpowereth justice and brings mercy — the immediate prior statement Corianton had heard); Alma 41:13–15 (the restoration merciful for the merciful that opens into this chapter); Alma 12:24–34 (Alma's earlier teaching at Ammonihah on the probationary state and the plan of redemption); 3 Ne. 27:13–16 (the risen Christ's own summary of the plan — the gospel as the satisfying of justice and the offer of mercy); D&C 19:15–20 (Christ's own account of the suffering that satisfied justice — I... have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent); D&C 45:3–5 (Christ pleading the cause of the penitent before the Father — mercy claiming the penitent, v. 24). ``