

INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 19 · 2016 · Pages 145-148

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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WHY DID YOU CHOOSE ME?

Joseph Grenny

Abstract: By seeing the example of a county prosecutor, I learned that we are never more like the Savior than when we willingly and vulnerably enter the self-created pain of another person's life.

I never feel I truly understand a celestial principle until I can study its mechanism in operation in mortal life. Don't get me wrong. I "stand all amazed" with others at the love Jesus offers me. I know He lives. I have felt His redeeming power in my life. But I have struggled to understand the connection between a man writhing in agony in a garden two thousand years ago and my being forgiven for angry things I said to my teenage son this morning. I can better appreciate the atonement if I can see how principles behind it — like vicarious suffering and grace — produce similar effects between mortals.

Two weeks ago I did. On the first Wednesday in January, I got a glimpse of atonement in operation. I watched how willing and worthy condescension yields power, profound intimacy, and personal transformation.

My wife and I volunteer regularly at a place called The Other Side Academy in downtown Salt Lake City. It is a remarkable place. I've come to think of it as a last-chance Zion. A few dozen men and women live there as an alternative to lengthy prison sentences. The "keeper of the gate" there is Dave Durocher. He spent twenty-three years in California prisons and was facing a twenty-nine-year sentence when he was offered a chance to go to a place like The Other Side Academy.

It saved his life. After completing his obligatory two years, he stayed an additional six years because he wanted to save others' lives as well. When he heard that people in Utah wanted to start The Other Side Academy, he left all he knew and loved — including a new and lucrative career — to come and once again consecrate his life to saving others. Knowing Dave Durocher has helped me better appreciate the mechanism of atonement.

In order to gain admittance to The Other Side Academy, an incarcerated person awaiting trial writes a letter to Dave. If the letter sounds sincere, Dave enters the jail for a face-to-face interview. The interviews are loud and peppered with colorful vocabulary as Dave tests whether candidates are truly willing to acknowledge their worthless and fallen state. If they are, they receive a letter accepting them into the Academy. To enter, they must commit to stay two years, and, even more impressive, *they must plead guilty to every charge the prosecutor levels against them.*

This is quite a gamble for many. One recent arrival explained that if he had stayed in jail and fought his charges he probably could have gotten his sentence down to twelve years in prison. Instead, in order to gain admittance to the Academy, he stood manacled in court and pled guilty to twenty-five years' worth of charges if he was ejected from The Other Side Academy before completing two years. He took the risk — trusting that Dave would not give up on him — because he wanted a new life. Much of what residents are expected to do for two years is lift and save others.

The first Wednesday of January I attended a nightly seminar where outside guests are invited to share important ideas from their lives. The speaker that night was Christine Scott — the Utah County prosecutor responsible for sending many of her Academy audience to prison over the years. To say she had the audience's attention would be a profound understatement. They were shackled to her every word.

For thirty minutes this powerful and articulate woman stood in front of her erstwhile quarry recounting the story of her college romance with a fascinating returned missionary who turned out to be an alcoholic and, later, a meth addict. She described her descent into unhealthy entanglement in his addictions and the torturous process of extricating herself. "I learned," she said, "that I can't save someone if they don't want to be saved. I vowed never again to let myself get drawn into trying to solve someone's problem *for* them. And I have kept that vow ever since."

I haven't fully introduced you to Christine. She did not simply represent *justice* to the students that night. She represented much, much more. You see, Christine is also the reason they are there.

Two years ago the first student from Utah applied for this kind of alternative to incarceration. The applicant was a man I'll call Jed — a career criminal whom Christine despised. Christine had been a police officer sixteen years earlier when Jed was arrested for the first time. She always remembered him because he was the first person she ever thought

she might have to kill. He was aggressive and threatening. She reached for her gun, but, fortunately for both of them, he surrendered. When Christine later became a prosecutor, she would practically lick her lips when she got a new chance to incarcerate Jed. And over the years, he gave her many. When he was arrested in 2014, his case landed again on Christine's desk — this time with enhanced felonies. She could put him away for a very, very long time.

As she read the long string of charges, her boss entered her office and asked if she would consider allowing Jed to go to a program like The Other Side Academy. She recoiled inwardly. Her silent response was, "Over my dead body." And then something remarkable happened. As her boss left her office she said, "An overwhelming feeling came over me that I should let him go."

She drove to Utah County Jail and summoned Jed from his cell. Jed wept in a way she thought he was incapable of. He told of finding God, of his revulsion at who he was. He told her he knew he had no right to ask for any breaks. And yet he hoped — at age 34 — to do something with the rest of his life. Christine had heard this act from hundreds before this. But something inside her told her this was real. A wiser version of a part of her that had been locked away since her college days began to stir.

She finished her remarks that night with the following warning, "I want you to know that I love my job. What I do is important. I protect the public. You need to know that if any of you walk away from this two-year commitment I will lock you up. I will not hesitate." Pause. "But I also want you to know that I believe in you. I see good in you. And I wish nothing but the best for you."

Next, Christine invited questions. Ten hands shot up. She called on a shy-looking man inked from wrist to neck. "Christine," he began. "You and I have known each other a long time."

Christine nodded. The man had been arrested thirty-four times.

"You had me on a lot of stuff before I asked to come here."

His eyes welled with tears.

"I just want to know," he said, eyes pleading, "Why did you choose me for this place?"

Suddenly it wasn't him asking, and it wasn't Christine answering. In my mind, it was me asking and the Savior answering. "Why did you choose me? Why did you do it for me?"

Her voice answered for the Savior, "I can't tell you for sure. It was a feeling."

The man smiled. I wept.

The other nine raised hands wondered the same thing. “Why me?”

Christine went to a place of profound discomfort the day she visited Jed in Utah County Jail. She offered grace by interrogating her well-informed judgments about him. Based on faith in a feeling, she took a risk by giving Jed an alternative to decades in prison.

I’m sure I hardly understand the smallest part of the Atonement. But I learned something about its principles by watching them in operation that night. I learned that we are never more like the Savior than when we willingly and vulnerably enter the self-created pain of another person’s life. I saw that if we enter their world without succumbing to its evils we can be granted enormous influence to lift and love that person. Godly intimacy is influence.

I “stood all amazed” as I watched a dozen felons embrace the woman who had previously prosecuted them, which led to a deeper appreciation for One who endures the pain of entering my world so He can love, lift, and influence me.

Joseph Grenny is a leading social science researcher specializing in organizational and business performance; an active speaker who has shared the stage with such figures as General Colin Powell and General Electric’s legendary Jack Welch, addressing such groups as NASA, the Willow Creek Global Leadership Summit, the American Bankers Association, the American Society of Training and Development, and the HSM World Business Forum; and a New York Times bestselling author (*Crucial Conversations* [2002], *Influencer* [2007], *Change Anything* [2012], and *Crucial Accountability* [2013]). He has been a regular contributor to *BusinessWeek* and *Forbes*; appeared on *The Today Show*, CNN, Bloomberg, and Fox Business News; and been cited in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*. More than 300 of the Fortune 500 companies have employed his work.

