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LEHI'S DREAM AND THE PLAN OF SALVATION

Ryan Atwood

***Abstract:** Lehi's dream symbolically teaches us about many aspects of Heavenly Father's plan of salvation. The central message of Lehi's dream is that all must come unto Jesus Christ in order to be saved. Each of us has the choice to pursue the path that leads to eternal joy and salvation or to choose a different way and experience undesirable outcomes. In this paper, elements of Lehi's dream and supporting scriptures are analyzed to see how they relate to key aspects of the plan of salvation and our journey through life.*

Lehi's dream of the tree of life recorded in the Book of Mormon offers a symbolic portrayal of Heavenly Father's plan of salvation. Lehi recognized his dream as a vision from God, and after awaking he felt confident in the eternal destiny of his sons Nephi and Sam but was deeply concerned for the eternal welfare of his two oldest sons, Laman and Lemuel.¹

In his vision, Lehi was led to a large and spacious field in which he saw a tree that produced brilliant white fruit.² After partaking of the fruit, which he said "was desirable to make one happy," Lehi noted that its taste was "most sweet," and his soul became filled "with exceedingly great joy" (1 Nephi 8:10–12). Lehi quickly became eager to have his family partake of the fruit also. He noted that his wife Sariah and his sons Sam and Nephi partook, but Laman and Lemuel refused to come to the tree.³

Lehi also saw a large and spacious field with a countless number of people in it, many of whom made their way toward a strait and narrow path with an iron rod to its side. The path and the rod extended along the bank of a river and led directly to the tree. After the travelers began their journey on the path toward the tree, they were soon overshadowed by a mist of darkness that caused many to veer off of the path and become

1. See 1 Nephi 8:2–4, 36.

2. See 1 Nephi 8:9–11.

3. See 1 Nephi 8:12–18.

lost. Others, however, pushed through the mist of darkness and made their way to the tree by holding onto the iron rod.⁴

On the other side of the river from the path and the tree was a great and spacious building that “stood as it were in the air high above the earth” (1 Nephi 8:26). Lehi observed that the building was filled with men and women of all ages who wore elaborate, fine clothing and mocked and pointed their fingers at those who had come to the tree to partake of its fruit. The scoffing from those in the great and spacious building caused all who heeded them to feel ashamed, “and they fell away into forbidden paths and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:27–28).

Lehi saw others who “fell down and partook of the fruit of the tree” after having pressed forward along the path while “continually holding fast to the rod of iron” (1 Nephi 8:30). Lehi seems to have included himself and the other righteous members of his family among this group, noting that they also experienced the ridicule of those in the great and spacious building — but, he said, “we heeded them not” (1 Nephi 8:33).

In addition to those making their way to the path toward the tree, many others neglected the path altogether and instead sought after the great and spacious building. Although a large multitude entered into it, not all who journeyed toward the building were able to get there. Many of those pursuing the great and spacious building became lost from Lehi’s view as they wandered down “strange roads,” and others ended up drowning in the river.⁵

Lehi’s dream is fascinating not only for its symbolism and imagery but because, as President Boyd K. Packer taught, “all of us are in it.”⁶ The central message of Lehi’s dream is that all must come unto Jesus Christ in order to receive salvation, which is also the overarching theme of the Book of Mormon.⁷ The purpose of this paper is to examine how elements of Lehi’s dream relate to key aspects of our Heavenly Father’s plan of salvation and our journey through life.

4. See 1 Nephi 8:19–24.

5. See 1 Nephi 8:31–33.

6. Boyd K. Packer, “Lehi’s Dream and You” (devotional, Brigham Young University, January 16, 2007). <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/boyd-k-packer/lehis-dream/>.

7. David A. Bednar, “Lehi’s Dream: Holding Fast to the Rod,” *Ensign* (October 2011): 34, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2011/10/lehis-dream-holding-fast-to-the-rod>.

The Tree of Life

Much of what Lehi saw in his vision would be left to personal interpretation if not for the faithful actions of his son Nephi. After learning of his father's dream, Nephi desired to "see, and hear, and know of these things" for himself through the power of the Holy Ghost (1 Nephi 10:17). While pondering his father's vision, Nephi was caught away by the Spirit of the Lord and taken to an exceedingly high mountain where he was shown the things which his father saw.⁸

The first thing Nephi saw in his vision was the tree, which he later identified as the tree of life.⁹ He described the tree as being more beautiful, whiter, and more precious than any earthly thing.¹⁰ After desiring to know what the tree represented, Nephi was shown a vision of the virgin Mary holding the Son of God in her arms.¹¹ Nephi was then asked, "Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?" Nephi responded that the tree of life represented "the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things" (1 Nephi 11:21–22).

There is no greater manifestation of the love of God than in His willingness to send His Son, Jesus Christ, to the world to perform the Atonement that would enable all of Heavenly Father's children to return unto Him: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). Thus, in the ultimate sense, the tree of life is a representation of Jesus Christ.¹²

It is fitting that a tree with outstretched branches and enough fruit for all to eat is a symbol of the Savior. The scriptures contain many portrayals of a loving Savior standing with outstretched arms, inviting all who will to come unto Him and partake of His salvation.¹³ As Alma put it, "Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you" (Alma 5:33).

Just as the tree of life is central to Lehi's dream, Jesus Christ is central to our Heavenly Father's plan of salvation. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, "The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of

8. See 1 Nephi 11:1–6.

9. See 1 Nephi 11:8, 25. See also 1 Nephi 15:22.

10. See 1 Nephi 11:8–9.

11. See 1 Nephi 11:10–20.

12. Bednar, "Lehi's Dream," 33–34; see also Kevin W. Pearson, "Stay by the Tree," *Ensign* (May 2015): 114, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2015/05/sunday-afternoon-session/stay-by-the-tree>.

13. See, e.g., Jacob 6:4–5; Alma 5:34; Mosiah 16:12; Alma 19:36; 3 Nephi 9:13–14.

the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.”¹⁴

The Fruit of the Tree

The scriptures use magnificent terms to describe the fruit of the tree of life. Lehi called the fruit “sweet,” “white,” “desirable to make one happy,” and “desirable above all other fruit” (1 Nephi 8:10–12). Nephi added that the fruit is “most precious and most desirable above all other fruits; yea, and it is the greatest of all the gifts of God” (1 Nephi 15:36). Alma described it as that “which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure” (Alma 32:42).

If the tree of life is a symbol of Jesus Christ, then the fruit of the tree represents that which comes from Him, including the blessings of His Atonement.¹⁵ Just as fruit from a tree provides our physical bodies with vital nutrients, the Savior’s atoning sacrifice provides significant spiritual blessings to our souls, including the following.

Eternal Life

The ultimate blessing available through Jesus Christ is eternal life, which, like the fruit of the tree of life, is described as being “the greatest of all the gifts of God.”¹⁶ Some scriptures employ language similar to that in Lehi’s dream when they admonish us to *partake* of the salvation offered through Jesus Christ.¹⁷ For example, the Nephite record keeper Amaleki exhorted us to “come unto Christ, who is the Holy One of Israel, and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption” (Omni 1:26).

Cleansing from Sin

The symbolism of pure and white fruit coming from the tree of life helps us to remember that sanctification is one of the blessings made available through Jesus Christ.¹⁸ Recognizing this truth, Moroni exhorted us to “cry mightily unto the Father in the name of Jesus, that perhaps ye may

14. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 49, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-joseph-smith/chapter-3?lang=eng>.

15. Bednar, “Lehi’s Dream,” 34.

16. 1 Nephi 15:36; Doctrine and Covenants 14:7.

17. See, e.g., 2 Nephi 26:24; Ether 12:8–9.

18. See Moses 6:59–60.

be found spotless, pure, fair, and white, having been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, at that great and last day” (Mormon 9:6).

The sanctification that comes as we exercise faith in Jesus Christ, repent of our sins, and receive the Holy Ghost also allows us to become perfected in Him. Moroni concluded the Book of Mormon with this exhortation: “Come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness. ... And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, ... that ye become holy, without spot” (Moroni 10:32–33).

Joy

Lehi recalled that partaking of the fruit of the tree of life caused his soul to be filled with “exceedingly great joy” (1 Nephi 8:12). The gospel of Jesus Christ is designed to help us be happy both in this life and eternally, for “men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25). King Benjamin exhorted his people to “consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God” (Mosiah 2:41). Exalted individuals in the celestial kingdom will feel joy that “shall be full forever,” and will live “in a state of never-ending happiness,” singing “ceaseless praises with the choirs above, unto the Father, and unto the Son, and unto the Holy Ghost.”¹⁹

Nourishment and Satisfaction

Nephi taught that the iron rod “led to the fountain of living waters, *or* to the tree of life” (1 Nephi 11:25). The Savior made a similar comparison when he referred to Himself as “the fountain of all righteousness.”²⁰ To the Jews in the New Testament, He taught that He was both the bread of life *and* the source of living water.²¹ Thinking of the Savior in terms of both food and drink helps us better understand what He can provide for our souls. Physical foods such as fruit and bread satisfy our appetites and provide us with the nutrients needed for our bodies to remain healthy and strong. Water is also essential for life, cleanses us, and provides satisfaction to those who drink it.

As the bread of life, the fountain of living waters, and the tree of life, the Savior is the ultimate source of fulfillment, strength, nourishment, and satisfaction. What He provides to those who follow Him is unlike anything the world has to offer. Those who go about their lives seeking after the

19. 2 Nephi 9:18; Mosiah 2:41; Mormon 7:7.

20. Ether 12:28; see also Ether 8:26.

21. See John 4:10; 6:35.

pleasures of the world come away feeling empty and unfulfilled. Compared to the treasures on the Earth, which are eventually corrupted by moth and rust,²² the Savior offers “treasure in heaven, yea, which is eternal, and which fadeth not way; yea, that ... precious gift of eternal life” (Helaman 5:8).

Spiritual Rebirth

Those who come unto Jesus Christ can be filled with the Holy Ghost, who is the catalyst for spiritual rebirth and a mighty change of heart. After King Benjamin’s people repented of their sins, they said the Spirit of the Lord had “wrought a mighty change” in their hearts, which caused them to “have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). Those who experience a change of heart “become new creatures” who are willing to leave their sinful lives behind and walk “in a newness of life” along the strait and narrow path.²³

The Essential Nature of the Tree of Life

The tree of life is glorious, purifying, abundant, satisfying, and essential, and so is Jesus Christ. To describe the tree is to describe the Redeemer. “He is the light and the life of the world; yea, a light that is endless, that can never be darkened; yea, and also a life which is endless, that there can be no more death” (Mosiah 16:9). He is “the law, and the light,” the “fountain of living waters,” in Him “there should come every good thing.”²⁴

Those in Lehi’s dream who did not come to and stay by the tree eventually perished.²⁵ The same is true for us. Only by looking unto and connecting ourselves with Jesus Christ can we gain eternal life.²⁶ We must rely completely upon Him because there is no other way to receive salvation.²⁷ He taught, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). King Benjamin echoed this truth when he taught his people that “there shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:17).

22. See Matthew 6:19.

23. Mosiah 27:26; Romans 6:4.

24. 3 Nephi 15:9; 1 Nephi 11:25; Moroni 7:22.

25. See 1 Nephi 8:28, 32; 11:36; 12:17.

26. See 3 Nephi 15:9.

27. See, e.g., 2 Nephi 2:6–8; 6:15; 9:41; 25:20; Mosiah 3:11–12; 4:6–8; 5:7–11; 15:19; Alma 11:39–40; 34:9; 37:46–47; 38:9; Helaman 5:9.

The Great and Spacious Building

In Heavenly Father's plan of salvation, it is essential for His children to be presented with choices between good and evil. Having these choices helps us to "know to refuse the evil, and choose the good" (Isaiah 7:15). Lehi taught that if there were not an opposition in all things, "righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad" (2 Nephi 2:11). After being cast out of the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve recognized that they could experience joy and eternal life — or the fruits of the tree of life — even after they had partaken of the forbidden fruit. Eve declared, "Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient" (Moses 5:11). It would be difficult to appreciate the sweetness of the fruit of the tree of life without understanding anything about its opposite.

In Lehi's dream, the great and spacious building situated beyond the forbidden paths represents the enticement to do evil. It is akin to "the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter" (2 Nephi 2:15). If the tree of life symbolizes the Savior and everything good, sweet, and eternal, then the great and spacious building represents that which is evil, bitter, and temporary.

Those in the great and spacious building may temporarily experience what they consider to be happiness, but their way of life will ultimately lead to misery and destruction. Nephi prophesied of the fall of the great and spacious building, "and the fall thereof was exceedingly great" (1 Nephi 11:36).

Descriptions of the Great and Spacious Building

The great and spacious building is characterized by its popularity among people of all ages and walks of life.²⁸ Nephi said the building was "the pride of the world," and the angel taught that it is "the world and the wisdom thereof" and "the vain imaginations and the pride of the children of men."²⁹ A number of teachings and accounts from the Book of Mormon can help us better understand the pride, wisdom, and vain imaginations that are characteristic of the great and spacious building.

The Pride of the World

One of the lessons the Lord would like us to learn from the Book of Mormon is to "beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old"

28. See 1 Nephi 8:27, 33.

29. 1 Nephi 11:35–36; 12:18.

(Doctrine & Covenants 38:39). Unrepented pride will eventually destroy our souls.³⁰ President Ezra Taft Benson taught that self-centeredness, conceit, boastfulness, arrogance, haughtiness, and competitiveness are all elements of pride, but “the central feature of pride is enmity — enmity toward God and enmity toward our fellowmen.”³¹

Those in the great and spacious building demonstrated their enmity toward God through their unwillingness either to partake of the fruit of the tree of life or to remain at the tree after having done so. They demonstrated their enmity toward their fellowmen by mocking, scorning, and pointing their fingers at those who were partaking of the fruit. Similar to mockers who occupied a building “high above the earth” (1 Nephi 8:26), many scriptures in the Book of Mormon speak of people *lifted up* in pride.³² Knowing their eventual fate should cause us to avoid such haughtiness and instead humble ourselves “in the depths of humility” (Mosiah 4:11).

Worldly Wisdom

Speaking of the prideful who are learned, the Nephite prophet Jacob taught that they “think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves.” He warned of the consequences of such an attitude: “Wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.” Therefore, worldly wisdom can be eternally beneficial only to those who “hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:28–29).

Those who rely exclusively on worldly wisdom while ignoring the counsels of God are similar to those of whom Paul prophesied: “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). Such sophistication smothers faith. Like Nephites of old, some of these people convince themselves that the doctrine of Christ is “a foolish and a vain thing,” or that it is “not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come.”³³ They accuse Church leaders, as Korihor did, of cunningly “leading away the people after the silly traditions of their fathers” and arguing that “no man can know of anything which is to

30. See Jacob 2:16.

31. Ezra Taft Benson, “Beware of Pride,” *Ensign* (May 1989): 4. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1989/05/beware-of-pride>.

32. See, e.g., 2 Nephi 26:20; 28:12; Jacob 1:16; 2:13; Mosiah 11:5, 19; Alma 1:6, 32; 4:6, 8; 6:3; 31:25; 45:24; 3 Nephi 6:10, 13; 16:10; 4 Nephi 1:24; Helaman 3:34; 6:17; 12:5; Mormon 8:28.

33. 3 Nephi 2:2; Helaman 16:18.

come,” and “ye cannot know of things which ye do not see; therefore ye cannot know that there shall be a Christ.”³⁴

Vain Imaginations

The description of the great and spacious building standing “as it were in the air, high above the earth” (1 Nephi 8:26) can be interpreted to mean that the building had no foundation and was floating in the air.³⁵ Considering how difficult it would be to enter a floating building, it seems one lesson we can learn from this symbol is that those moving toward the great and spacious building were seeking after something ultimately impossible to obtain. This idea is well-represented in the scriptures. When speaking to the wicked Nephites of his day, Samuel the Lamanite lamented, “Ye have sought all the days of your lives for *that which ye could not obtain*; and ye have sought for happiness in doing iniquity, which thing is contrary to the nature of that righteousness which is in our great Eternal Head” (Helaman 13:38). Mormon made a similar observation about the wicked people of his day, who in their misery murmured that “the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin” (Mormon 2:13).

Lehi noted many in his vision who did enter into the great and spacious building,³⁶ but they could not have fully experienced the happiness they were seeking, for “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10). Jacob taught that the happiness prepared for the saints will be hidden forever from “the wise, and the learned, and they that are rich, who are puffed up because of their learning, and their wisdom, and their riches” unless they humble themselves before God.³⁷ The Savior acknowledged that those who do the works of the devil “have joy in their works for a season,” but this is not true happiness and will be short-lived, for “by and by the end cometh, and they are hewn down and cast into the fire, from whence there is no return” (3 Nephi 27:11).

Nephi pointed out a great and terrible gulf dividing those in the great and spacious building from those gathered to the tree of life.³⁸ Lehi later described this as an “eternal gulf” (2 Nephi 1:13), suggesting that in their current state, it

34. Alma 30:31; Alma 30:13; Alma 30:15.

35. See “Lesson 3: The Vision of the Tree of Life,” *Book of Mormon: Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual* (1999): 13. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/book-of-mormon-gospel-doctrine-teachers-manual/lesson-3>.

36. See 1 Nephi 8:33.

37. 2 Nephi 9:42–43.

38. See 1 Nephi 12:18.

would be impossible for those in the building to be where those gathered to the tree were — in a state of eternal happiness, peace, and rest.

The Strait and Narrow Path

Lehi beheld in his dream a strait and narrow path with an iron rod that led travelers from the large and spacious field to the tree of life.³⁹ Just as there was only one way to the tree of life for the multitudes in Lehi's vision, in our Heavenly Father's plan of salvation, there is only one path that leads to eternal life.⁴⁰ Because the Savior lived a perfect life, He can credibly say, "follow me, and do the things which ye have seen me do" (2 Nephi 31:12), for living as He did and relying upon Him *is* the pathway to eternal life. The strait and narrow path goes by many other names, including "the way," "paths of righteousness," "the doctrine of Christ," "wisdom's paths," and "the covenant path."⁴¹

It is instructive that the travelers in Lehi's dream did not begin their journey on the strait and narrow path but instead started from the large and spacious field which represented the world.⁴² These individuals had to "come forth, and commence in the path which led to the tree" (1 Nephi 8:22). In our Heavenly Father's plan of salvation, the way we enter this strait and narrow path is by entering through the gate of baptism. Jacob taught that "there is none other way" onto this path "save it be by the gate" (2 Nephi 9:41). Nephi said, "The gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water; and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire, and by the Holy Ghost. And then are ye in this strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life; yea, ye have entered in by the gate" (2 Nephi 31:17–18).

The symbolism of entering a path through a gate suggests that baptism is not a final destination but the beginning of a life-long journey along the strait and narrow path that will culminate in eternal life. Nephi taught that after repenting and being baptized, "ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men" and that, "if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the words of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: ye shall have eternal life" (2 Nephi 31:20).

39. See 1 Nephi 8:19–20.

40. See Matthew 7:13–14.

41. 1 Nephi 10:18; Alma 7:19; 2 Nephi 13:21; Helaman 12:5; Russell M. Nelson, "As We Go Forward Together," *Ensign* (April 2018): 7, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2018/04/as-we-go-forward-together>.

42. See 1 Nephi 8:20.

It is essential for each of us to experience this process in order to obtain eternal life. Nephi said, "This is the way; and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God. And now, behold, this is the doctrine of Christ" (2 Nephi 31:21). Or, as Enoch put it when summarizing this process to the people of his day, "This is the plan of salvation" (Moses 6:62).

The strait and narrow path can be accessed by all God's children who will repent and be baptized.⁴³ Mormon emphasized this when he taught, "Yea, thus we see that the gate of heaven is open unto all, even to those who will believe on the name of Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God. Yea, we see that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God" (Helaman 3:28–29). Nephi taught, "And he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile" (2 Nephi 26:33).

Mists of Darkness

As the travelers in Lehi's dream progressed along the strait and narrow path, they encountered a mist of darkness, and many left the path and became lost.⁴⁴ Nephi taught that "the mists of darkness are the temptations of the devil, which blindeth the eyes, and hardeneth the hearts of the children of men, and leadeth them away into broad roads, that they perish and are lost" (1 Nephi 12:17). It is important to understand that all on the strait and narrow path experienced the mists of darkness. Dealing with the temptations of the devil is something each of Heavenly Father's children must do. The temptations themselves are not what cause us to leave the path, but it is rather the heed we give to them. Nephi taught that those who fall to temptation experience three related consequences: spiritual blindness, hardened hearts, and leaving the strait and narrow path.

Spiritual Blindness

Those who "choose darkness rather than light" (Helaman 13:29) experience spiritual blindness because they have access to less of God's light.⁴⁵ The resultant darkness makes it more difficult to discern between good and evil and to resist subsequent temptations from Satan.

43. See Alma 19:36.

44. See 1 Nephi 8:23.

45. The Lord taught the Prophet Joseph Smith that everything which is of God is light, and when a person walks in, or is obedient to the light he or she has received

When we experience spiritual blindness, we lose our ability to clearly see what we had once been able to see. Speaking about individuals who have become spiritually blinded and hardened by yielding to the temptations of the devil, Alma taught, “To them is given the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries” (Alma 12:11). The blindness of eyes and hardness of hearts that results from yielding to temptation can cause a person who once had a testimony of the precious truths of the gospel to eventually forget what he or she once knew.

Hardened Hearts

The scriptures speak of the heart as our spiritual core and “the figurative source of all emotions and feelings.”⁴⁶ The Lord desires our hearts to be pure, soft, and yielded to him.⁴⁷ But our hearts become hardened as we yield to Satan’s temptations.⁴⁸ Many behaviors and consequences are associated with a hardened heart, including unbelief,⁴⁹ an inability to understand the words of the Lord,⁵⁰ murmuring,⁵¹ contention

from God, that person will receive more of His light. “And that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (Doctrine & Covenants 50:24). The increased light one receives through obedience to God makes it easier to discern between good and evil and increases one’s capacity to continue walking in God’s light.

46. “Heart,” Guide to the Scriptures, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/heart>.

47. See, e.g., 3 Nephi 12:8; Alma 24:8; Helaman 3:35.

48. See 1 Nephi 12:17.

49. See, e.g., 2 Nephi 33:2; Alma 8:9–11; 15:15; 21:12; 33:19–22; 35:3; 45:23; Helaman 16:22–23; 3 Nephi 1:19–22; 2:1–2; Mormon 3:2–3; Ether 11:13.

50. See, e.g., Mosiah 13:32; 26:3; Alma 12:9–11.

51. See, e.g., 1 Nephi 2:11–12; 3:5–6; 3:31; 7:6–12; 15:1–11; 16:1–5, 18–22, 34–38; 17:17–22. Laman and Lemuel provide a distressing example of the behaviors and consequences associated with a hardened heart. One of the most obvious manifestations of their hard hearts was their continual murmuring. Nephi recorded that his older brothers murmured when Lehi was commanded to flee the city of Jerusalem, when they were commanded to return to Jerusalem to get the brass plates from Laban, when they were traveling through the wilderness after enlisting the family of Ishmael on their journey, when they could not understand the meaning of Lehi’s dream, when Nephi explained the meaning of Lehi’s dream to them, when Nephi’s bow was broken, when Ishmael died, and when Nephi was commanded to build a ship.

Because of the hardness of their hearts, Laman and Lemuel also refused to believe and obey the words of the Lord and were physically and verbally abusive to members of their family. Not long after Lehi’s death, Nephi recorded that the anger of Laman and Lemuel “did increase against me, insomuch that they did seek to take away my life.” Due to these dangerous circumstances, Nephi was commanded by the Lord to take his family and all who would go with him into the wilderness. As

and hatred,⁵² withdrawal from Church participation,⁵³ loss of the companionship of the Holy Ghost,⁵⁴ and, in a final sense, destruction.⁵⁵

Forbidden Paths

The mist of darkness in Lehi's dream caused many to "lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost" (1 Nephi 8:23). Lehi later referred to the roads veering from the strait and narrow path as "forbidden paths" or "strange roads."⁵⁶ Forbidden paths represent the many ways we can live our lives that are not in harmony with God's will. The Savior taught that the way to destruction is broad, and there would be many who would follow it.⁵⁷ King Benjamin reminded his followers, "I cannot tell you all the things whereby ye may commit sin; for there are divers ways and means, even so many that I cannot number them" (Mosiah 4:29).

Although they are popular, forbidden paths are not smooth or easy to follow. They cause people to forfeit blessings and become lost and unhappy and will ultimately lead to destruction if they do not choose to return to the strait and narrow path.⁵⁸ When people veer off the paths of righteousness, "they are driven about as chaff before the wind" (Mormon 5:16), for "they are as a wild flock which fleeth from the shepherd, and scattereth, and are driven, and are devoured by the beasts of the forest" (Mosiah 8:21).

The Filthy River and Awful Gulf

The river Lehi saw running alongside the strait and narrow path was described by Nephi as containing filthy water.⁵⁹ Lehi saw many of those who left the strait and narrow path to wander down strange roads were "drowned in the depths of the fountain" (1 Nephi 8:32). The river of

a result of their hardened hearts, Laman and Lemuel were cursed by being cut off from the Lord's prophet and access to the blessings of the gospel. See 1 Nephi 2:12, 18; 3:3-5, 3:28-29, 31; 4:13; 15:3, 11; 16:37-38; 17:17-18, 48; 18:9-19; 2 Nephi 2:1; 5:2, 3-7; 5:20-21.

52. See, e.g., Mosiah 10:12-17; Alma 9:30-32; 20:30; 35:15; 48:3; Helaman 3:33-36; 10:13-15; Mormon 4:11.

53. See, e.g., Alma 1:24; 5:57; 6:3; 43:23-24; Helaman 3:1; Mormon 1:17.

54. See, e.g., 2 Nephi 33:2; Jacob 6:8; Helaman 6:35.

55. See, e.g., 2 Nephi 6:10; Jacob 6:8-10; Alma 14:11.

56. 1 Nephi 8:28, 31.

57. See Matthew 7:13.

58. See, e.g., 1 Nephi 8:32; 2 Nephi 5:20; Mosiah 2:36; Helaman 12:21; 13:8; Ether 14:25.

59. See 1 Nephi 12:16.

filthy water symbolizes spiritual filthiness and the depths of hell.⁶⁰ Nephi called this river “an awful gulf, which separated the wicked from the tree of life, and also from the Saints of God” (1 Nephi 15:28). The awful gulf was also referred to by the angel as “the word of the justice of the Eternal God” (1 Nephi 12:18).

Because we are imperfect people living in a fallen world, each of us will experience time off the strait and narrow path. But unless we choose to repent of our sins, the awful gulf spoken of by Lehi and Nephi will forever separate us from God and His righteous followers.⁶¹ Alma put it this way: “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” (Alma 42:14).

Thankfully, through His atoning sacrifice, the Savior has prepared “a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell” (2 Nephi 9:10). Abinadi emphasized Jesus Christ’s role in delivering us from the demands of justice when he taught, “And thus God breaketh the bands of death, having gained the victory over death; giving the Son power to make intercession for the children of men — Having ascended into heaven, having the bowels of mercy; being filled with compassion towards the children of men; *standing betwixt them and justice*; having broken the bands of death, taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions, *having redeemed them, and satisfied the demands of justice*” (Mosiah 15:8–9).

Because of the Savior’s victory over sin and death, the way has been prepared for the demands of justice to be satisfied, enabling followers of Jesus Christ to be led “in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked” (Helaman 3:29). The demands of justice can be escaped only if we humbly repent of our sins, which involves turning away from destructive paths and returning to the strait and narrow one. As we do so, we begin to press forward toward God, coming closer to Him with every faithful step.

The Iron Rod

Also running alongside the strait and narrow path was an iron rod, which Nephi taught was a representation of the word of God.⁶² God delivers His word to us through means such as the scriptures,⁶³ the words of prophets

60. See 1 Nephi 12:16; 15:26–27.

61. See 1 Nephi 15:30–36.

62. See 1 Nephi 15:24.

63. See, e.g., 1 Nephi 1:11–12; 13:20–23, 35–40; 2 Nephi 32:3; Jacob 7:10–12.

and apostles,⁶⁴ the Holy Ghost,⁶⁵ heavenly messengers,⁶⁶ His church,⁶⁷ the temple,⁶⁸ and, most importantly, Jesus Christ Himself.⁶⁹

It is interesting that in Lehi's dream, the Savior is represented by the tree of life, the strait and narrow path, and the iron rod. As He taught Thomas in the New Testament, He is the way (the path), the truth (the rod), and the life (the tree).⁷⁰ The word of God has many important functions. Below are some heavily emphasized in the scriptures.

Leads Us to Jesus Christ and Eternal Life

Lehi taught that the purpose of the iron rod is to lead travelers to the tree of life.⁷¹ When we study and follow the words of Christ, they will connect us to Him. The Nephites in Alma's time were prepared to receive the word of God so they would "as a branch be *grafted into the true vine*, that they might enter into the rest of the Lord their God" (Alma 16:17).

Nephi prophesied that the word of God would help his future seed "come to the knowledge of their Redeemer and the very points of his doctrine, that they may know how to come unto him and be saved."⁷² Later, he said he recorded his words for his people to read because "it persuadeth them to do good; it maketh known unto them of their fathers; and it speaketh of Jesus, and persuadeth them to believe in him, and to endure to the end, which is life eternal" (2 Nephi 33:4). The strait and narrow path is the way to the Savior. The iron rod helps us stay on that path so we can come unto Him.

Guides Us Through Mists of Darkness

Only by holding to the iron rod could those on the strait and narrow path in Lehi's dream safely make it through the mists of darkness without getting lost.⁷³ Similarly, the way for us to withstand the temptations of the devil is to diligently study and adhere to the words of God. Doing so will fill us with the Spirit of the Lord, which will guide us through

64. See, e.g., 2 Nephi 3:7; 2 Nephi 33:4–5; Jacob 4:6; 7:11–12; Words of Mormon 1:17–18; Mosiah 3:13; 11:20–23; 18:19–24; Alma 4:19; 5:13.

65. See, e.g., 2 Nephi 32:3–5; Jacob 4:6; 7:10–12; Alma 13:28; Moroni 10:3–5.

66. See, e.g., 2 Nephi 32:3; Mosiah 3; Helaman 5:11; Moroni 7:22, 25.

67. See, e.g., Alma 16:15–17; 45:20–22.

68. See, e.g., 2 Nephi 12:2–3; Isaiah 2:2–3.

69. See, e.g., 1 Nephi 16:39; 18:1–3; Alma 34:6; 38:9.

70. See John 14:6.

71. See 1 Nephi 8:19, 30; see also 1 Nephi 11:25.

72. 1 Nephi 15:14; see also 2 Nephi 25:26.

73. See 1 Nephi 8:24, 30.

Satan's mists of darkness.⁷⁴ Nephi promised that "whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction."⁷⁵

Provides Spiritual Nourishment

Studying and obeying the word of God provides us with spiritual nourishment that strengthens us against adversity and temptation. This is one of the ways we can create "a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall" (Helaman 5:12). The strength and nourishment that comes from Jesus Christ, the "true vine" (1 Nephi 15:15), is not only available to those gathered to the tree of life to partake of the fruit, but also to all those pressing forward along the strait and narrow path. It is not surprising that we are encouraged to "feast upon the words of Christ" (2 Nephi 32:3) and to gather together often to be "be nourished by the good word of God" (Moroni 6:4).

At the Tree

Lehi recorded that some of those who partook of the fruit in his dream became ashamed and fell away after being mocked by those in the great and spacious building, whereas others partook of the fruit and gave no heed to the mocking.⁷⁶ The multitudes who partook of the fruit in Lehi's dream had made it to the tree after pressing forward along the strait and narrow path, so why did some remain faithful while others fell away? The actions taken both before each group arrived at the tree and while they were at the tree help us to understand their differing outcomes.

74. See, e.g., 1 Nephi 1:11–12; Jacob 4:6; Alma 15:15–17. The word of God provides light that is bright enough to dispel Satan's mists of darkness: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Psalm 119:105). Recounting the conversion of Alma's people after they had escaped the wickedness that was so prevalent during King Noah's reign, Alma the Younger taught that "they were in the midst of darkness; nevertheless, their souls were illuminated by the light of the everlasting word" (Alma 5:7). Nephi recognized that although he was "encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me," he was able to make it through the darkness because of his willingness to place his trust in the Lord and hearken unto His words (see 2 Nephi 4:18–20).

75. 1 Nephi 15:24; see also Helaman 3:28–30.

76. See 1 Nephi 8:24–33.

Clinging Versus Continually Holding Fast

Lehi noted that those who eventually fell away had been “clinging to the rod of iron” as they journeyed toward the tree, while those who remained faithful had been “continually holding fast” to it (1 Nephi 8:24, 30). The word *continually* used with the latter group suggests that those who eventually fell away may have been holding to the iron rod only part of the time. Elder David A. Bednar taught, “Clinging to the rod of iron suggests to me only occasional ‘bursts’ of study or irregular dipping rather than consistent, ongoing immersion in the word of God.”⁷⁷

It seems that the consistency demonstrated by the travelers who continually held fast to the iron rod strengthened them against adversity and helped them to more fully appreciate their reward at the end. Continually holding fast to the iron rod throughout our lives helps us to build a spiritual foundation that strengthens us against the fiery darts of the adversary.

Two scriptural accounts from the Book of Mormon — Alma’s discourse on the Word and the conversion of King Benjamin’s people — illustrate the importance of continually holding fast to the iron rod and consistently pressing forward along the strait and narrow path throughout our lives.

Alma’s Discourse on the Word

Alma compared the word of God to a seed in his famous discourse to the Zoramites. While Lehi’s dream motivates us to hold fast to the word of God with our hands, Alma encouraged us to plant it in our hearts, symbolizing the Lord’s desire for us to internalize His words, qualities, and character into our lives.⁷⁸

Alma taught that the results of planting the Word in our hearts are incremental and largely dependent upon what we do with the seed after it is planted. He promised those who would not cast the seed out because of unbelief, that in its early stages of growth, the young seed would begin to “swell within your breasts,” “enlighten your understanding,” and “be delicious” (Alma 32:28). These are important feelings for each of us to experience with the word of God in our journey toward eternal life, for

77. See David A. Bednar, “A Reservoir of Living Water,” (devotional, Church Education System, February 4, 2007). speeches.byu.edu, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/david-a-bednar/reservoir-living-water/>.

78. Alma and Amulek emphasized that the “word” represented by the seed in Alma’s analogy is a symbol of Jesus Christ. Amulek taught that “the word is in Christ unto salvation” (Alma 34:6). After teaching the Zoramites about the atoning sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Alma said, “And now, my brethren, I desire that ye shall plant *this word* in your hearts” (Alma 33:23; emphasis added).

they provide an assurance that “the word is good” (Alma 32:28) and that the path we are on is worth further pursuit. But this is not our intended spiritual destination. Stopping here would be like getting a taste of the fruit of the tree of life and then never coming back to get more.

Alma exhorted us to nourish our developing seed “with great care, that it may get root, that it may grow up, and bring forth fruit unto us.”⁷⁹ He warned that if we do not properly nourish the young plant growing in our hearts, it “will not get any root,” and will wither away and die after being scorched by the sun (Alma 32:38).

Perhaps this is what happened to those occasionally clinging to the iron rod in Lehi’s dream. They had done enough to experience a small taste of the goodness of the Savior and His gospel as they followed the process of coming to the tree, but they did not have the spiritual foundation necessary to withstand the mocking of those in the great and spacious building. Because they had weak spiritual roots, their testimony was scorched when it met opposition.

Alma promised that those who consistently nourish the word of God in their hearts “with great diligence, and with patience, looking forward to the fruit thereof” would eventually be able to “reap the rewards of [their] faith” (Alma 32:43). Their seed will “take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life” (Alma 32:41). These people can be compared to those in Lehi’s dream “continually holding fast to the rod of iron, until they came forth and fell down and partook of the fruit of the tree” (1 Nephi 8:30). Because of their efforts to continually nourish the seed from beginning to end, they were able to enjoy a spiritual feast at the tree rather than a small taste of the fruit.⁸⁰

King Benjamin’s People

Prior to his death, King Benjamin gathered the Nephites together to confer the kingdom upon his son Mosiah and preach a final sermon to his people.⁸¹ As part of his sermon, Benjamin shared a message he had received from an angel who prophesied of the Savior’s life and warned of the consequences associated with disobeying God’s commandments.⁸²

After the king had finished conveying the angel’s message to his people, he looked upon the multitude and saw they had fallen to the earth

79. Alma 32:37; see also Alma 32:29, 34–36.

80. See Alma 32:42.

81. See Mosiah 1:10.

82. See Mosiah 3.

in fear.⁸³ These Nephites humbly prayed for mercy, crying in one voice, “O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ” (Mosiah 4:2). After crying these words, “the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ” (Mosiah 4:3).

These people had partaken of the fruit of the tree of life. King Benjamin even used words and expressions similar to those used in Lehi's dream to describe his people's experience, saying, “Ye have come to the knowledge of the glory of God ... and have *“tasted of his love,* and have received a remission of your sins, which causeth such *exceedingly great joy* in your souls” (Mosiah 4:11). But the remainder of King Benjamin's message focused on what his people still needed to do to receive the blessings of eternal life.

The king taught that those filled with the love of God would be motivated to engage in behaviors characteristic of pressing forward along the strait and narrow path, such as calling on the name of the Lord daily, observing His commandments, living peaceably with one another, raising up righteous children, caring for the poor and needy, and watching their thoughts, words, and deeds.⁸⁴ He promised, “If ye do this ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God, and *always* retain a remission of your sins; and ye shall grow in the knowledge of the glory of him who created you” (Mosiah 4:12). He emphasized that it was not enough for his people to *obtain* a remission of sins, but that they should strive to *retain* “a remission of [their] sins from day to day” (Mosiah 4:26).

Moved by King Benjamin's words, the people later testified that “the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent ... has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). They entered into a covenant with God to “do his will, and to be obedient unto his commandments” for the rest of their lives (Mosiah 5:5). The spiritual rebirth of the Nephites put them on the strait and narrow path leading to eternal life. King Benjamin exhorted them to “be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works, that Christ, the Lord God Omnipotent, may seal you his, that you may be brought to heaven, that ye may have everlasting salvation and eternal life” (Mosiah 5:15).

King Benjamin's teachings illustrate the essential nature of continually pressing forward along the strait and narrow path *after* tasting the fruit. If his people had experienced what they did only to fall away later on, they

83. See Mosiah 4:1.

84. See Mosiah 4:11–30.

would have been no different than the people in Lehi's dream who fell away after arriving at the tree. Therefore, the king emphasized the need for them to "continue in the faith even unto the end of this life," declaring that "this is the man who receiveth salvation" (Mosiah 4:6–7).

Falling Away versus Falling Down

While those who had been clinging to the iron rod eventually "*fell away* into forbidden paths and were lost," those who continually held fast "came forth and *fell down* and partook of the fruit of the tree" (1 Nephi 8:28, 30). These people were not going to fall away, for there was nowhere else they would rather be than by the tree. The conversion they had experienced while pressing forward along the strait and narrow path strengthened them against opposition, and the appreciation they felt for the tree and its fruit clearly overshadowed any shame that could have been inflicted by those who were "point[ing] the finger of scorn" (1 Nephi 8:33) at them from the great and spacious building.

In an eternal sense, the people in Lehi's dream who fell down after arriving at the tree symbolize those who will receive eternal life. Not only will their joy be eternal,⁸⁵ but their salvation is permanent. Alma taught that those who inherit eternal life will "be brought to *sit down* with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the holy prophets who have been ever since the world began, having your garments spotless even as their garments are spotless, in the kingdom of heaven *to go no more out*."⁸⁶

Conclusion

Lehi's dream provides an excellent framework for understanding important components of our Heavenly Father's plan of salvation. The central message of both Lehi's dream and the Book of Mormon is that we must come to Jesus Christ or we cannot be saved. While each of us will experience temptation and adversity, Heavenly Father has mercifully provided us with resources such as the word of God, essential ordinances and covenants, and the companionship of the Holy Ghost to help us return to His presence.

While all are free to come unto the Savior, the choice is ultimately up to each of us. Alma taught, "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" (Alma 42:27). The way to partake of

85. See 2 Nephi 9:18.

86. Alma 7:25. See also Alma 34:36; Helaman 3:28–30.

eternal life, joy, peace, and fulfillment is by following Jesus Christ. There is no other way to do so.

Elder Lawrence E. Corbridge put it this way:

Jesus Christ is the Way. He is Light and Life, Bread and Water, the Beginning and the End, the Resurrection and the Life, the Savior of the world, the Truth, and the Way.

There is only one way to happiness and fulfillment. He is the Way. Every other way, any other way, whatever other way, is foolishness.

He offers a well of living water. Either we drink and never thirst more, or we don't and foolishly remain thirsty still.

He is the Bread of Life. Either we eat and hunger no more, or we don't and foolishly remain weak and hungry still.

He is the Light of the World. Either we follow Him and see clearly, or we don't and foolishly remain blind and in darkness still.

He is the Resurrection and the Life. He said, 'The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.' Either we learn of Him and have life more abundantly, or we don't and foolishly remain dead still.

He is the Savior of the world. Either we accept the blessings of His Atonement and are made clean and pure, worthy to have His Spirit, or we don't and foolishly remain alone and filthy still.

He is the Way.⁸⁷

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87. Lawrence E. Corbridge, "The Way," *Ensign* (November 2008): 34–35, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2008/11/the-way>.

