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Book of Mormon Perspectives on Prosperity

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Abstract: Points out that “prosperity can become a curse and lead to moral and spiritual decay.” Several scriptures are quoted and discussed to help teach the correct use of material wealth. “Prosperity in and of itself does not improve a man’s character.”

Book of Mormon Perspectives on pr

By Dr. John W. Bennion

● Many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints enjoy a standard of living that is unprecedented in the history of mankind. Never have so many had access to such abundant material possessions and comforts. Even those who are relatively poor by modern standards would seem rich and prosperous by the standards of former generations.

History teaches us that temporal conditions can and sometimes do change rapidly. No one knows how long this period of general pros-

perity may last. However, we are subject to some of the same temptations that confronted former generations who lived during times of material prosperity. The Book of Mormon is a rich source of information about the potential divisive influence of prosperity on human life. The experience of the Nephites and Lamanites should give us pause in counting our material blessings. Indeed, the very word blessing should be used cautiously, because unless people are alert to the dangers, prosperity

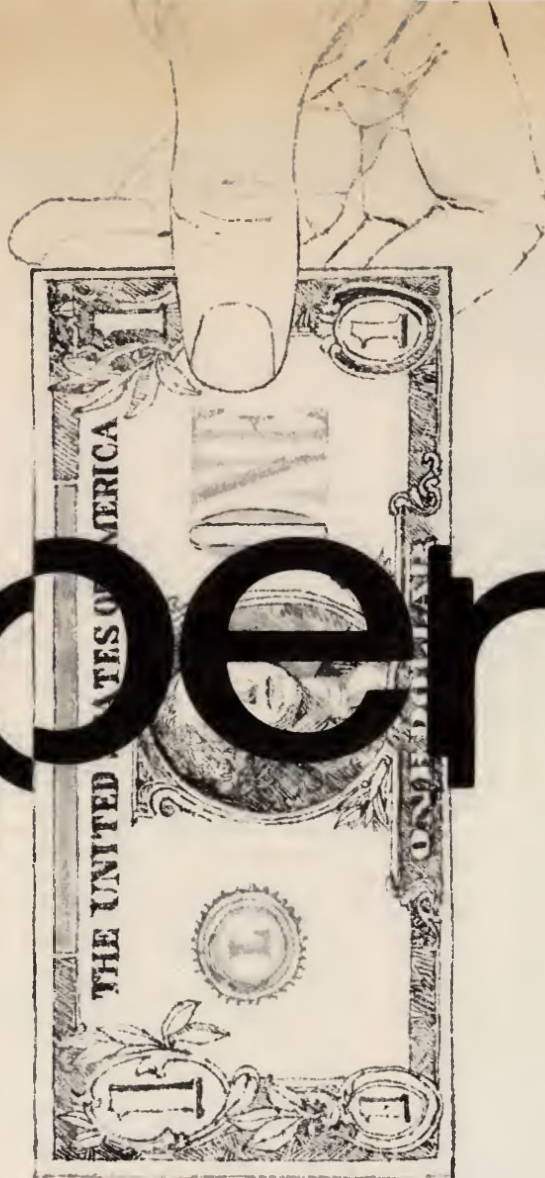
can become a curse and lead to moral and spiritual decay. This is one of the great lessons of the Book of Mormon.

All other things being equal, material abundance can enhance life. Moreover, it is possible to be both prosperous and righteous, but the corrupting potential of affluence is great enough to warrant our careful attention. An analysis of the experiences that the Nephites had with prosperity reveals several temptations to which they often succumbed that are present in our own day.

Prosperity sometimes causes people to be vain and self-righteous.

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Prosperity



People are tempted to become proud of their riches and of themselves because of their possessions. This tendency was noted among the Nephites a few years before the birth of Christ.

“And it came to pass that the fifty and second year ended in peace also, save it were the exceeding great pride which had gotten into the hearts of the people; and it was because of their exceeding great riches and their prosperity in the land; and it did grow upon them from day to day.” (He. 3:36.)

Prosperity in and of itself does not improve a man’s character; there is no correlation between one’s

material possessions and the nobility of his soul. Nevertheless, prosperity tends to make people feel superior and hence distorts their view of themselves.

Closely related to the temptation of pride is the tendency of people who are prosperous to feel self-sufficient in relation to God. Material abundance can produce a false sense of security and mastery and cause people to feel no need for divine guidance and assistance.

“Yea, and we may see at the very time when he doth prosper his people, yea, in the increase of their fields, their flocks and their herds, and in gold, and in silver, and in

all manner of precious things of every kind and art; . . . yea, then is the time that they do harden their hearts, and do forget the Lord their God, and do trample under their feet the Holy One—yea, and this because of their ease, and their exceedingly great prosperity.” (He. 12:2.)

A profound sense of our relationship to God and a feeling of need for his help is the very essence of spirituality. Unfortunately, material abundance tends to generate a sense of self-sufficiency, illusory as it may be, that can erode responsiveness to things spiritual. Samuel recognized and pointed out this

condition to the Nephites: "Ye do not remember the Lord your God in the things with which he hath blessed you, but ye do always remember your riches, not to thank the Lord your God for them; yea, your hearts are not drawn out unto the Lord, but they do swell with great pride, unto boasting . . . and all manner of iniquities." (He. 13:22.)

While it is true that many people are able to retain and even strengthen their faith while living in prosperous circumstances, the relationship between prosperity and loss of faith is all too common to be ignored. The history of the Nephites reveals an ominous pattern. A generation, through its faith and diligence, works hard to serve the Lord and provide for itself. They are blessed in their efforts and soon become prosperous. But the fruits of their labors cause them to feel proud, vain, and self-sufficient, and they begin to lose the very faith that helped them to become prosperous in the first place. Sometimes this process takes place in one generation. At other times it is the second or third generation that succumbs to the temptations of material abundance.

A third danger inherent in material abundance is the tendency for the prosperous to become insensitive and unresponsive to human need and suffering. In periods of general prosperity, whether in our own day or in Book of Mormon times, not everyone shares in the abundance. There are always some who, for one reason or another, need help. The Book of Mormon gives many examples of the corrosive effect of prosperity on such attributes as empathy, sympathy, compassion, and unselfishness. Material possessions and creature comforts can cause us to lose our ability to identify with and respond in helpful ways to those who do not share in the blessings. Alma noticed this tendency among his people.

"Yea, he saw great inequality among the people, some lifting themselves up with their pride, despising others, turning their backs upon the needy and the naked and those who were hungry, and those who were athirst, and those who were sick and afflicted." (Al. 4:12.)

The ability to respond compassionately to human need and suffering is fundamental to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nothing can adequately compensate for the lack of it. Moroni, toward the end of his life, recognized that future generations, perhaps including our own, would live under conditions of great abundance. He foresaw also that these conditions would cause some to lose their sensitivity to human need, as had happened so often among the Nephites. His description of future generations should have a sobering influence on our own prosperous generation.

"For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted.

"Why do ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick and the afflicted to pass by you, and notice them not?" (Morm. 8:37, 39.)

Any prosperous generation is subject to the same temptations that frequently undermined the moral and spiritual life of the Nephites. Material abundance can and often does result in a materialistic outlook on life. The history of the Nephites sounds an ample warning to guard against the subtle tendencies toward materialism. The principle of tithes and offerings can be thought of as a curb on materialism. When we give regularly ten percent of our income in tithes and an additional portion in offerings for the development of the Church, missionary work, ministering to the needs of the poor among us and assisting them to become self-sustaining where possible, this practice should help us keep a proper perspective on material values. Beyond the sustaining of life in reasonable comfort, material values should be thought of as a means of cultivating and fostering moral, spiritual, intellectual, and social values.

The paying of tithes and offerings teaches us to use part of our material resources for purposes beyond the accumulation of material possessions and creature comforts for ourselves. If we tithe in the proper spirit, we will learn to put our resources to work in support of values other than purely materialistic ends. Money spent in support of education, a missionary, good music, educational travel, honorable candidates for public office, or worthy charities is surely more in harmony with the gospel than an endless pursuit of material things and superficial diversions that have no life in them.

Our society is both prosperous and materialistically oriented. The good life, for example, as interpreted by the advertisements on television, consists in the accumulation of material possessions and the enjoyment of physical pleasures. Widespread promiscuity, drug abuse, and divorce demonstrate the vulnerability of our generation to the dangers of material prosperity. The gospel of Jesus Christ and the lessons of the Book of Mormon are powerful antidotes to the materialism of our day if we will but heed the warnings and the admonition of the Lord to "seek not for riches but for wisdom, and behold, the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto you, and then shall you be made rich. Behold, he that hath eternal life is rich." (D&C 6:7.) ○