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“BEHOLD, I HAVE DREAMED A DREAM”

Susan Easton Black

Lehi was a prophet of God and a patriarch to his family. We join this prophetic patriarch in the valley of Lemuel, to learn from and to live by his words of counsel.

Preceding our entrance into his realm, Lehi heard the Lord's command “that [Lehi's] sons should take daughters to wife, that they might raise up seed unto the Lord” (1 Nephi 7:1). And immediately following, the family “gathered together all manner of seeds of every kind, both of grain . . . and . . . of fruit” (1 Nephi 8:1). The two parallel themes involve seeds: one the seed of posterity and the other the plant seeds of life substances needed to preserve Lehi's family.

It appears that these two related themes may have preoccupied Lehi immediately preceding the tree of life dream (1 Nephi 8:1–4). He anguished over the bitter contention among his sons (1 Nephi 7:16). Two sons desired righteousness and two murmured against truth (1 Nephi 2:16–17 and 1 Nephi 2:11–12).

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What hopes did Lehi have for a continuation of his seed as his sons united with the daughters of Ishmael? Perhaps hopes and fears for his own seed were heightened by the concurrent gathering of the plant seeds needed to sustain life. Would these grain and fruit seeds survive the tempest to save and to sustain generations of his family? Would his own posterity survive the storms of jealousy (1 Nephi 3:6), doubt (1 Nephi 2:12–13), envy (1 Nephi 2:22), and hate (1 Nephi 2:24) to save and to bless their brethren? (1 Nephi 7:6).

Perhaps as this loving father pondered the outcome of his seed, the Lord revealed the eternal plan of salvation in a family epic dream. In this familial vision Lehi learned of the critical choices available to his family. These choices, when made by his descendants, would ultimately determine their eternal destinies.

Announcement: I Have Dreamed a Dream

“Behold, I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision,” announced Lehi (1 Nephi 8:2).¹ What were the hopes and fears of his family as they heard this prophetic announcement?

Previous visionary dreams given to Lehi had resulted in loss of fortune (1 Nephi 2:4), home (1 Nephi 2:2), and comfort (1 Nephi 2:6). One dream caused the family to tent in the wilderness rather than continue in the comfort of the prophetically doomed Jerusalem (1 Nephi 2:15). Another dream had caused the boys in the family to risk their lives and even to take a life in order to obtain family genealogy and scripture (1 Nephi 3, 4).

Lehi’s dreams and the family’s reaction to those dreams dominate the first chapters of the Book of Mormon. It is obvious that these dreams were not greeted with unified acceptance. Nephi’s mother, Sariah, “complained against my father, telling him that he was a visionary man” (1 Nephi 5:2). To which Lehi exclaimed, “I know that I am a visionary man” (1 Nephi 5:4). Lehi knew that he was receiving divine messages from the Lord in dreams. The verbal description of these dreams, while vivid visual experiences to Lehi, were not quickly visualized or appreciated by most of his family. As Sariah complained (1 Nephi 5:2), Nephi pondered (1 Nephi 11:1), and Laman and Lemuel disputed (1 Nephi 15:2).

What of this new dream? Was this dream to signal wealth or poverty? Would it lead the family to safety or annihilation?

Would it result in peaceful coexistence or warlike confrontation? Would it result in feelings of humiliation and subjugation for the rebellious Laman and Lemuel? Would new challenges or opportunities be revealed for the righteous Nephi and Sam? What dangers would this additional dream herald for Sariah and her divided family?

Lehi Told the Outcome of the Dream

Prior to relating the dream to his family, Lehi told the expected outcome of the dream to them. Lehi began with what to his patriarchal role was the bottom line, "I have reason to rejoice in the Lord because of Nephi and also of Sam" (1 Nephi 8:3). And why does he rejoice? Because "they, and also many of their seed, will be saved" (1 Nephi 8:3). This to a patriarch father is an assured hope that he will have an enduring, eternal posterity through Nephi and Sam.² If Nephi, Sam, and their posterity continued to choose the path they chose in the vision, they would merit eternal lives.

For Lehi the dream also evoked a contrasting reaction of exceeding fear. What was the source of this great fear? Lehi was not seized with fear for his own life but for the lives of his two wandering sons "lest they should be cast off from the presence of the Lord" (1 Nephi 8:36).³ Lehi despairs as he receives prophetic glimpses that two of his sons will not merit eternal life.

Could words of counsel make a difference for Laman and Lemuel? Lehi seems to think so. Darkened, forbidden paths had already attracted them from righteous pursuits. Perhaps a warning repetition of the dream would make the difference needed by these sons.

Earlier Lehi had tangibly gathered the seeds that would preserve their physical life. He now seeks to gather in spiritually his far less tractable seed—his wayward sons.

Lehi Relates the Dream to His Family

Lehi explained why he had cause to rejoice and yet to fear. He recalled his dream in a detailed, coherent, orderly manner.⁴ The dream for Lehi unfolded line upon line and step by step. Let us learn from this symbolic dream why Lehi had mixed emotional reactions.

Dark and Dreary Wilderness

Lehi saw himself and perhaps all mankind beginning in the "dark and dreary wilderness" (1 Nephi 8:4). Indeed, we are in a darkened world, a world filled with doubts, uncertainties, and error. The veil of forgetfulness has closed so that God's continuing presence is no longer with us. Lehi knew that for his own salvation he must find his way back to the light and life of Christ, and escape the loneliness of the dark. Like Lehi, we also need to discover this unalterable truth.

Man Dressed in White

A man dressed in contrasting white "came and stood before [Lehi]" (1 Nephi 8:5). It is not known all that he spoke to Lehi but we do know he "bade [Lehi to] follow him" (1 Nephi 8:6). There was no hesitation or equivocation on Lehi's part, for he had eyes that saw, ears that heard, and feet that were quick to follow the Lord. This man, whether a messenger from the throne of God, the Holy Ghost, or Jesus the Christ,⁵ led father Lehi through the dark and dreary waste. His words were a symbolic representation of Christ's words, to "follow me" (Matthew 4:19 and 2 Nephi 31:10). These words chart a course of hope for all mankind amidst darkened surroundings.

Lehi Prays

Though Lehi followed his guide obediently, with childlike faith and love, he began to yearn for greater light. He began to pray for mercy. "I began to pray unto the Lord that he would have mercy on me, according to the multitude of his tender mercies" (1 Nephi 8:8).⁶ He was now ready to move from a simple, obedient faith to the more challenging choices that would determine his eternal worth.

The choices leading to exaltation demand more than the clear choice Lehi had previously experienced between the brilliant white robe of the loving guide and the dreary darkness everywhere else (1 Nephi 8:5, 7). These more demanding choices are between the true light of Christ and the pseudo, tinsel "lights" of Lucifer.

Large and Spacious Field

Lehi now views the "large and spacious field" (1 Nephi 8:9). A relief from the darkness; yet, was it really? A later and closer look at this field would eventually reveal its deceptive, luciferous

perils. However, at this point in his dream Lehi's "mind [was so] swallowed up in other things" that Lucifer's seductive lights, snares, and traps went unnoticed (1 Nephi 15:27).

His gaze, his being, was immediately riveted upon a tree, the tree of life.⁷ This tree yields fruit to cure every ill, to extend love to all, and to signal the ultimate destination of the eternal pathway to godhood (1 Nephi 8:11).⁸ The continual partaking of its life-giving properties means eternal life to Lehi, a life full of the enjoyment of the love of God.

Here we hearken back to the gathering concept. The family had been gathering seeds so they could continue on their appointed journey. Lehi sees the culmination of the seed: the tree, the fruit. As he observes this tree, he finds that its "fruit was desirable to make one happy" (1 Nephi 8:10). This is a different seed and a different kind of fruit than that which the family had been laboring to obtain. Lehi went "forth and [partook] of the fruit." By partaking he discovered a fruit that "was most sweet, above all that [he had] ever before tasted," "white, to exceed all the whiteness that [he] had ever seen." (1 Nephi 8:11.) His soul was open to the sweetness of the illuminating light of glorified truth. His joy was indescribable. He had found the purpose for traversing the dark, avoiding false beacons, in his taste of the pearl of great price.

This pearl is the love of God. "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" (John 3:16).

Filled with the love of God, this noble patriarch "began to be desirous that [his] family should partake of it also" (1 Nephi 8:12),⁹ that each family member should follow the path he had first taken in childlike obedience, that each one might desire through personal revelation to ignore the enticing carnality and embrace the pearl—God's love.

Lehi cast his eyes about in hopes that he might discover his family (1 Nephi 8:13). So filled with the love of God was Lehi that even though he now saw (apparently for the first time) the perilous waters that endangered all who strayed from the strait way he did not note their filth (1 Nephi 15:27). His only thought appears to have been to find his precious family and have them partake of the life-giving tree. Where were they?

River of Water

Sariah, his most beloved companion and mother of his family, was the first one he saw. She had only the last, but surely

the darkest and most dangerous, steps ahead to reach the tree. To Lehi's eyes, opened by God's mercy, the difference between life and death was clear and unmistakable. But Sariah, joined by Sam and Nephi, hesitated (1 Nephi 8:14).¹⁰ His wife and his children must obey their patriarch's lead to avoid the snares of Lucifer in the river of water.¹¹ Would she be tempted to ignore his call and rely on her own wisdom? She and her obedient children “stood as if they knew not whither they should go” (1 Nephi 8:14).¹²

Lehi did not hesitate, for he had tasted of the fruit. He knew the course towards great joy. He could not and would not force them. They were already close, but still in great danger from the river of filthy water (1 Nephi 12:16). He beckoned them with a loud voice, calling them to come unto him and partake of the fruit (1 Nephi 8:15). The result of his sure voice was that Sariah, Sam, and Nephi came to him and partook of the most desirable fruit (1 Nephi 8:16).¹³

Empty places remained in his family circle. Where were Laman and Lemuel? Each one in the family was loved. Each empty place left multitudes of posterity outside the gathering at the tree. They had murmured (1 Nephi 2:11). They had not understood (1 Nephi 2:12). They had rebelled (1 Nephi 2:21). Yet they had arrived at the “head of the river” (1 Nephi 8:17). Now they must choose between the tree of life and Lucifer's brilliant but deceptive perils in the spacious field.

Lehi states of Laman and Lemuel, “I saw them, but they would not come unto me and partake of the fruit” (1 Nephi 8:18). No wonder father Lehi had such a mixed reaction to his dream. “I have reason to rejoice in the Lord because of Nephi and also of Sam” (1 Nephi 8:3), but “I fear exceedingly because of [Laman and Lemuel]” (1 Nephi 8:4).

Rod of Iron

From his vantage point at the tree, it appears that Lehi looked for aids to guide his wayward sons to the tree. The first aid he saw was the word of God symbolically represented as a rod of iron.¹⁴ It was not out in the field but it “extended along the bank of the river, and led to the tree” (1 Nephi 8:19). It followed each turn, guided over each stumbling rock, and beckoned around each precipice of the deadly river. It led with secured, enduring strength through the spacious field to the tree.

Strait and Narrow Path

The strait and narrow path can only be the gospel way to eternal life.¹⁵ Yet it appears that it leads not only to the tree of life but also perilously by the nearby “head of the fountain, unto a large and spacious field” (1 Nephi 8:20). This constricted, hazardous, narrow path is located by the rod of iron along the precipice at the edge of the river where a misstep would plunge a traveler into the river of death.

As Lehi viewed the path, his scene shifted to a future people. He saw numerous concourses of people, many of whom may have been his posterity. They struggled to find and follow the narrow path. Some found the path but seemed to have only a tenuous hold, if any, on the iron rod. Because the path extended to differing places, the traveler on the path needed to cling to the rod in order to reach the tree (1 Nephi 8:21–23).

Mist of Darkness

In the midst of dark perils, if the travelers were walking without constant guidance on the path they missed the pearl of great price. A few turns in the strait and narrow path without the sure guidance of the iron rod and they were lost. “There arose a mist of darkness; yea, even an exceedingly great mist of darkness, insomuch that they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:23).

The mist of darkness is the temptations of Satan.¹⁶ These temptations include sin, vice, prideful exaltation of the human mind, and harmful pleasures. These satanic devices blur the perspective ability of the traveler. They dull his sense of human dignity, erode integrity, and obscure the vision of the rod.

In greatest sorrow Lehi saw multitudes of the people, who initially desired the greatest blessings demonstrated by their struggle to find the narrow path, lose their way, their eternal potential, because they did not hold onto the iron rod (1 Nephi 8:23).

In contrast, Lehi saw many others that found the narrow path, “caught hold of the end of the rod of iron; and they did press forward through the mist of darkness, clinging to the rod of iron, even until they did come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree” (1 Nephi 8:24). Yet, after partaking of the glorious fruit they “cast their eyes about as if they were ashamed” (1 Nephi 8:25).¹⁷

Lehi must have wondered what caused these travelers to be ashamed of the eternal tree of life. What enticement from the spacious field could have dominion over once godly persons to cause them to choose a carnal attitude and be ashamed of past godly attributes?

Great and Spacious Building

"A great and spacious building; and it stood as it were in the air, high above the earth" (1 Nephi 8:26). This building without foundation and without God's light was symbolic of the pride and vain imaginations of the world. Misguided and deceived multitudes, "both old and young, both male and female . . . [pointed] their fingers towards those who had come at and were partaking of the fruit" (1 Nephi 8:27).¹⁸ Such public merriment over a sacred partaking is an affront to the Saints as well as the God of heaven.

Satan will not uphold his own in their folly when confounded by the servants of God. His building and his host of subjugated followers will surely fall. Nephi saw the end of this building without a sure support. The building "fell, and the fall thereof was exceedingly great" (1 Nephi 11:36). This symbolic fall was a foreshadowing of the destruction of nations, kindreds, tongues, and people that fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb (1 Nephi 12:18 and 1 Nephi 11:35).

Nephi Summarizes the Remainder of Lehi's Dream

In his dream, Lehi saw other multitudes, some partaking of the fruit while others felt their way towards the great and spacious building (1 Nephi 8:30–31). He saw the fountain engulf in its quagmire those that lost their way to the tree (1 Nephi 8:32). Many were lost from Lehi's view while others wandered on strange roads (1 Nephi 8:32). Great was the multitude which he saw entering the strange building and then pointing the finger of scorn (1 Nephi 8:33).²⁰ But amidst all this multitude and variety of satanic choices available, Lehi remarked, "We heeded them not" (1 Nephi 8:33).

In his final statement Lehi despaired. The reason was that among the multitude moving toward the tree he did not see the two people for whom he had most diligently searched. His last statement was this: "Laman and Lemuel partook not of the fruit" (1 Nephi 8:35). They came not to their Savior to partake of his love.

Lehi Exceedingly Fears

Lehi shared this most sacred, visionary, symbolic dream with his family. How would his family react? Perhaps Lehi hoped the vision of the multitude's partaking and rejoicing would cause life patterns within his family to improve. He may have wanted the family to remember the joy of those who caught hold and continually held fast to the rod of iron.²¹

What would the family learn of envisioned deceptions? The deceptions seemed so clear to Lehi. Would these same deceptions appear logical and attractive to his wayward sons? Had he made it vivid enough for them to see that the death of the spirit results from the life of surface wealth, surface power, and surface gratification? Did his sons see that death awaited them in the spacious building? Could they now see that Satan's falsely "lighted temple" was approached by carnal feeling, not godly vision? Could they see that the death of the spirit began as the carnal became immersed and saturated in the fountain of filthiness?

Might Lehi have wondered what he could do to change what he had seen? This dream was more overarching than the taking to wife the daughters of Ishmael, the leaving of Jerusalem, or the acquiring of sacred plates. This dream showed Lehi the loss of half of his immediate posterity and eventually the loss of far more. Lehi knew the mercy of the Lord. Could the Lord's mercy be so great that his vision of the spiritual deaths of Laman and Lemuel might be merely a warning and not a final reality? Could there be a miracle that would break the barrier between father and sons as revealed in the vision?

"With all the feeling of a tender parent," Lehi exhorted, preached, prophesied, and "bade them to keep the commandments of the Lord" (1 Nephi 8:37-38).²² His choice words to these sons are not known. I take the literary license to express what I think must have been his feelings at this moment.

Oh sons, hear my voice.
 Oh Lord, extend thy great mercy.
 Oh sons, come follow me.
 Oh Lord, my heart is broken.
 Oh sons, I love you, grasp hold.
 Oh Lord, soften their hearts that they might see.
 Oh sons, find life, not death.
 Oh Lord, be merciful to them, to me.

Conclusion

Lehi's last recorded dream teaches the pattern of the eternal family. It teaches how a godly patriarch can guide and devote his life through Christ to the salvation of himself and his family. He gathers his family together, finds the Lord and follows him, hoping that his family will also follow him. He obeys without hesitation. He sacrifices all he has to endure the trials of life and be the exemplar needed for his family. He prays for mercy so that the atoning blood of Christ can be efficacious in his life and the lives of his loved ones. The darkness of life clears and he briefly notes the world but ignores its distractions, for his heart and soul are fully riveted on the true light of Christ—the tree of life. He pushes forward to the tree, partakes of its glorious fruit, and is filled with supreme joy, not partaking in self-indulgence but partaking with the conviction that this fruit is what he most wishes to share with his family.

He first sees and reaches out to his wife. She comes to him to join him in the love of God. He then reaches out to his children who need his loving call to make a final right choice. He then looks further to find his lost family members. His love wells up as he calls, but they being agents unto themselves do not respond. He searches to understand the world and its follies so that he might warn them of the imminent dangers that await their perilous choice. When they continue not to respond, he persists in faith, in love, praying that someday in God's mercy they will hear, and reach for the rod—the word of God—to lead them to eternal life (Alma 37:43–44).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Dreams and visions are often mentioned together in this verse, indicating their close relationship, although differing in important ways. See George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1955), vol. 1, p. 60.

2. It is significant that three of his family members partook of the fruit. These three were Nephi, Sam, and Sariah. Why did Lehi not say that he rejoiced because Sariah partook? It could be because the symbolism of the dream was the seeds—his continuing posterity.

3. One of the objects of this dream was to acquaint Lehi with the condition of his sons, in order that he might warn them, and bring them to repentance. Reynolds and Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, p. 61.

4. His vividly reported dream is in direct contrast to the total forgetfulness of the dream by Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2:1–5).

5. Who was the messenger that appeared to Lehi? A messenger, whom Nephi calls the Spirit, appeared also to him in a later vision. One school of thought says that it was the Holy Ghost; another indicates that it was Jesus Christ. Elder James E. Talmage of the Quorum of the Twelve takes the position that it was the Holy Ghost. Whether it was the Holy Ghost or Jesus Christ who was the messenger, the important concept to remember is the message which was delivered. See Sidney B. Sperry, *Answers to Book of Mormon Questions* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), pp. 29–30, and James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 30th Edition, p. 32.

6. "The fundamental and soul-satisfying step in our eternal quest is to come in a day when each does know, for himself, that God answers his prayers. This will come only after 'our soul hungers,' and after mighty prayer and supplication." Harold B. Lee, Conference Report, April 1969, p. 133.

7. It is interesting to note that the tree of life is mentioned sixteen times in the Book of Mormon, six times in the Old Testament, and three times in the New Testament. See James Strong, *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1894), pp. 1074–75; and George Reynolds, *Concordance of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: N.p., 1900), p. 419.

The *tree of life* is connected with the *cross*, the two having somewhat the same significance. Both relate to the resurrection, eternal life, the Lord, and the "love of God." The symbolism may be summarized by saying that the tree of life is representative of eternal life, to be obtained by those who love God. Before the crucifixion of Christ, the *tree of life* symbol was used extensively. After the crucifixion the cross seems to have replaced it to a degree. (Milton R. Hunter and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon* [Oakland, California: Kolob Book Co., 1950], p. 213.)

8. "The tree laden with fruit was a representation of the love of God which he sheds forth among all the children of men. The Master himself, later in his earthly ministry, explained to Nicodemus how that great love was manifested. Said he: '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'; and then the Master added: 'For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved' (John 3:16–17)." Harold B. Lee, Conference Report, April 1971, p. 90.

9. The sweet, white fruit made even more clear that "[his] work and [his] glory" was to share his joy with his posterity (Moses 1:39).

10. Sariah and Lehi were building together for eternities. Nephi and Sam were righteous examples to the unborn posterity of Lehi. Notice that those family members who gathered with Lehi were not perfect. Sariah had complained that her husband was a visionary man. Nephi had his heart softened. Sam had to be taught by Nephi the truths of heaven. In other words, each one at the tree had received of God's mercy in order to partake of the fruit.

11. See 1 Nephi 15:27 and 1 Nephi 12:16.

12. "To me, our leaders are true watchmen on the towers of Zion, and those who follow their counsel are exercising their agency just as freely as would be the man in the forest." Marion G. Romney, Conference Report, April 1942, p. 20.

13. Note that Lehi did not see his oldest sons first, even though through birth they entered into the dark and dreary world prior to Sam and Nephi. Could it be because others of his family had progressed closer to the tree?

14. See John 4:14.

15. Notice the spelling is *strait* not *straight*, and means a narrow passage of water connecting two large bodies of water, or narrow and strict. Examples are the Straits of Gibraltar and Straits of Magellan. These "straits" are not "straight."

16. See Matthew 13:4, 19. "And 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).

17. See Matthew 13:5, 6. "How can one be unfaltering? First, be alert enough to know that the challenge when it comes is individual." Boyd K. Packer, "Shall the Youth of Zion Falter?" *BYU Speeches of the Year*, 12 April 1966, pp. 7–8.

18. See 2 Kings 2:23–24; Psalm 1:1; Galatians 6:7.

19. This dream, seen in similarity by three (Lehi, Nephi, and Joseph Smith, Sr.), is only recorded in full with all of its symbols by father Lehi. For example, Nephi records the following symbols which he saw: (1) the tree and the fruit, (2) rod of iron, (3) great and spacious building, (4) mist of darkness, and (5) river of water. In other words, Nephi does not record seeing the strait and narrow path. When Laman and Lemuel began to ask Nephi questions, they only asked the interpretation of three parts of the dream. One is the tree, one is the rod of iron, and the other is the river of water. They do not ask for an understanding of the great and spacious building, the mist of darkness, or the strait and narrow path. Joseph Smith, Sr., saw the dark world, narrow path, stream of water, rope (rod of iron), pleasant valley, tree, fruit, spacious building, and the family joining him at the tree (see Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956], pp. 48–50).

20. See Matthew 13:7, 22.

21. Hold to the rod, the iron rod;
'Tis strong, and bright, and true.
The iron rod is the word of God;
'Twill safely guide us through.

Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985, No. 274.

22. This approach to Laman and Lemuel continued throughout the rest of Lehi's life. Even his last blessing to them was a plea to stop their unrighteousness and unite with family and with God (2 Nephi 1).