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Mae Blanch

The book of 3 Nephi is essentially a story of repentance. The first seven chapters show the need for it, the eighth tells of the destruction which comes when the people refuse to repent, and the remaining chapters recount the Savior's call for repentance and the response of the remnant who were "more righteous" than those who were destroyed.

The Lord emphasizes the importance of repentance in the first words he utters when he appears to the survivors of the Nephite people. He proclaims woe to all the people of the earth unless they repent and then relates the fate of all those Nephite cities whose inhabitants had refused his warning. His plea shows his love for his children. In fact, his call to repentance indicates the true nature of repentance: a gift of love from God to his people.

O all ye that are spared because ye were more righteous than they, will ye not now return unto me, and repent of your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you? Yea, verily I say unto you, if ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life. Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and blessed are those who come unto me. (3 Nephi 9:13–14)

Clearly, love and the longing to rescue his children from destruction are the essence of Christ's plea for repentance.

But the definition of repentance used by many people today involves two extremes which distort its true meaning. On the one hand are those who say Jesus loves us and will forgive us

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for whatever we do that is “only human,” thus echoing the philosophy of Nehor, the anti-Christ who, with his false teachings, confronted Alma. This attitude reflects Nephi’s prophecy about the last days:

And there shall also be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin; yea, lie a little, take the advantage of one because of his words, dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this; and do all these things, for tomorrow we die; and if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God. (2 Nephi 28:8)

This is the “man upstairs” view of God as a kind of personal genie who can be ignored until something is wanted and then called upon to fulfill whatever desire, righteous or not, may be current with the petitioner. Repentance, if ever it should be needed, is taken care of with an “I’m sorry” and if it is something serious with an, “I’m really sorry and I’ll never do it again . . . unless circumstances demand it.”

The other false view of repentance sees God as an arbitrary taskmaster who sets up laws which violate all natural instincts and who eagerly awaits the opportunity to punish those who break his rules. In this view, God’s laws are a test of obedience; breaking the law demonstrates humanity’s evil nature and arouses God’s wrath. Punishment is the expression of God’s anger, and his desire is to prevent further disobedience by instilling fear in the sinners and helping them forsake sin to avoid further punishment. Repentance mollifies God and frees the offenders from further pain. This attitude reflects the philosophy of Job’s comforters: God is a god of exact justice and the trick is to learn all the ways which offend God and avoid them. Thus, repentance becomes unnecessary. Those who fail in this endeavor are consigned to the everlasting fires of hell, a fate which supposedly satisfies God. Granted, my description of these two views is overstated, but these basic attitudes can be seen in the way many people respond to the concept of repentance.

In the first view, God is only a god of mercy, and repentance is a mere slap on the hand. The mixture of truth and error in this view, the mark of all false doctrine, is apparent. God *is* a god of mercy; he does love us and desires our eternal joy and the fulfillment of all our righteous desires. But the truth that no unclean thing can exist in the presence of God is ignored: the all important distinction between being saved *from* our sins rather than *in* our sins is never considered.

In the second view, God is only a god of justice, and repentance is motivated by God's anger and humankind's fear. Again, the mixture of truth and error is evident. God *is* a god of justice; mercy cannot rob justice or God would not be God. But he takes no pleasure in the punishment which is the inevitable, although not always the immediate, consequence of sin.

The history of God's dealings with humanity shows the errors in both of these views. The scriptures emphasize the Lord's continuous appeal for his sinful children to repent, to return to him, to choose life and not death. God never destroys the wicked without first sending and resending his prophets to call them to repentance (Alma 5:49ff). The prayers of even a handful of the righteous have been enough to preserve a society steeped in sin if there has been the least possibility for repentance (10:22–23). Thus repentance is truly a gift of love given to all humankind by a Father whose love is beyond human understanding. This view of repentance is established by the scriptures in two ways: first, by correcting the errors involved in the other two views, and second, by giving many examples of the Savior's love in teaching his people to repent.

Perhaps the first error that should be examined in establishing the falsehood in these two views is the misunderstanding of the nature of God's laws. The commandments God gives us are directions by which we may achieve happiness in this life and develop the qualities which will enable us to become like him and be with him in eternity. Section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants speaks of the Light of Christ "which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is *the law* by which all

things are governed” (D&C 88:13; emphasis added). Thus, the scriptures connect life and law; obedience to God’s law brings life, the abundant life that Christ promised. His commandments give us access to that abundant life. As section 130 reminds us, “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (vv 20–21). Law gives us access to God’s blessings; obedience to law assures us of them (3 Nephi 10:12). The underlying assumption in these scriptures suggests that the laws of God reflect his omniscient knowledge of us, his children, and the world he created. They are expressions of his love and concern for us; they are designed to protect us, to uplift us, to enlighten our minds and enlarge our souls until we can become “joint-heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17). God’s laws then are not arbitrary rules given to test humankind; neither are they helpful suggestions which can be disregarded at will. The Lord defines his purpose in law-giving thus: “And again, verily I say unto you, that which is governed by law is also preserved by law and perfected and sanctified by the same” (D&C 88:34).

A simple analogy will illustrate our relationship to God’s laws. I am a diabetic; my doctor gives me certain laws—do’s and don’t’s—which I must obey to control my illness. I must avoid excessive fats and sugars in my diet and eat only moderate amounts of other foods. I must exercise regularly. I must take insulin injections twice a day and test my blood sugar three times a day. I must avoid undue exertion, get proper rest, and watch carefully for any minor infections, especially on my feet. I need to check in with my doctor on a regular basis to monitor the progress of my disease. If I follow these “commandments,” I may control my illness and receive the blessing of health. If, however, I yield to the temptation of a hot fudge sundae or a Kara chocolate truffle, or decide to stay in bed an extra hour rather than rise and jog, I do not say my doctor is punishing me when my blood sugar climbs to unacceptable levels. And if I

continue to ignore his instructions and wind up in the hospital, I don't expect to say, "I'm sorry; please forgive me" and have my health immediately restored. My repentance must involve both ceasing to break the doctor's "laws" and changing my attitude, not resenting the restrictions placed on my license to do as I please, nor expecting to avoid the inevitable consequences of my foolish actions. Thus, obedience is required to the laws which the doctor understands are required for me to live and be healthy, and they are given to me for my well-being and to help me achieve my goals, not to complicate my life or deny me pleasure.

Section 88 gives a clear description of the spiritual consequences of breaking God's laws: "That which breaketh a law, and abideth not by law, but seeketh to become a law unto itself, and willeth to abide in sin, and altogether abideth in sin, cannot be sanctified by law, neither by mercy, justice, nor judgment. Therefore, they must remain filthy still" (v 35). Notice that the law breakers cannot be sanctified by mercy even though God loves them. Neither can they be sanctified by law nor justice since both require punishment for breaking the law. Sanctification can come only through the atonement of the Savior, made by him in mercy to fulfill the law of justice. Our role in sanctification is to repent, to cease breaking the law so that through his forgiveness we may receive the great gift the Savior has offered us—eternal life with him. Since that which is filthy cannot be in the presence of God, we must get rid of our filthiness through the atonement and qualify for that gift through repentance. Thus, if it were not for law, God's purpose for us would be frustrated. Each step in the process of salvation must be worked out in keeping with eternal law. The law does indeed preserve, protect, and sanctify us.

Another error common in the false view of repentance is that of a stern god who enjoys punishing his wayward children. But all the scriptures show the exact opposite (3 Nephi 17:14). The prophet Jeremiah reports that the Lord pled with wicked Israel, promising to take one of a city or two of a family who

would repent and bring them to Zion. Rather than God taking pleasure or even satisfaction in condemning them, Jeremiah records: “A voice was heard upon the high places, *weeping* and [supplicating] . . . Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings” (Jer 3:21–22; emphasis added). In Ezekiel 18:23 the Lord says, “Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die . . . and not that he should return from his ways and live?” Throughout the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, the Lord pleads with his children to choose righteousness and life rather than wickedness and death, always sending his prophets to warn them of their fate unless they repent. In perhaps the greatest scene of destruction ever recorded in the scriptures, that in 3 Nephi of sixteen cities and all their inhabitants destroyed by fire, flood, earthquake and other natural disasters brought upon the people by their iniquity, Mormon records that the first words spoken by the Lord were a call to repentance: “O all ye that are spared because ye were more righteous than they, will ye not now return unto me, and repent of your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you?” (3 Nephi 9:13). The Lord abhors the destruction that the people have brought upon themselves, but he notes that “the devil laugheth, and his angels rejoice, because of the slain of the fair sons and daughters of my people” (v 2). Thus, it is Satan, not God, who rejoices in the punishment of the wicked. God weeps and offers that gift of his love: repentance.

The Lord’s love for all his children, even those who reject him, is suggested by the metaphor he uses in 3 Nephi to describe his willingness to accept the penitent:

O ye people of these great cities which have fallen, who are descendants of Jacob, yea, who are of the house of Israel, how oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and have nourished you. And again, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, yea, O ye people of the house of Israel, who have fallen; yea, O ye people of the house of Israel, ye that dwell at Jerusalem, as ye that have fallen; yea, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens, and ye would not. O ye house of Israel whom I have spared, how oft will

I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart. (3 Nephi 10:4–6)

The image of the hen calling after her chickens to come to the shelter and safety of her wings portrays the love of the Savior, his desire to nourish his children, to keep them safe from their common enemy, Satan, to shelter them from the storms of life, to give them the opportunity to grow and fulfill the promise of their nature.

The image suggests other ideas as well. The chickens have strayed away from the hen. They have been lured from safety by their desire for adventure or rebellion, out into the tempting world where danger lurks beside every step. The hen calls to her chickens, but they must come of their own volition. They are not forced under her wings; they are invited, even urged, but they must exercise their own agency. In using this metaphor, the Lord designates his call to those of the fallen cities, who are descendants of Jacob, and to those of the house of Israel, who live at Jerusalem, establishing the right of the Savior to issue the call to repentance—they are his people who owe him obedience. And his use of the three verbs: “how oft have I gathered you; . . . how oft would I have gathered you; . . . how oft will I gather you” emphasizes his timeless call to repentance—past, present, and future. The Savior’s love is always there. His arms are always extended in mercy as long as there is any hope for his children to return to him. The true nature of repentance is not a test, not an indulgence, but a gift of love. It is one that we must take—it cannot be forced upon us.

Another misunderstanding about the nature of repentance may stem from the words used in the scriptures to describe God’s punishment. Although the Savior’s love for the sinner is unqualified, the punishment resulting from sin is often spoken of as expressing the wrath of God. Many scriptures note the total destruction of a city or a people as an expression of God’s anger. The first episode of total destruction is recorded in the story of the flood from which only Noah, his family, and the plants and

animals on the ark were saved. The next account is that given of Sodom and Gomorrah. After removing the one righteous family from these cities, God rained fire and brimstone on them, destroying not only the cities but all life—plant, animal, and human—within them. The history of Israel in the promised land contains other incidents of God punishing the wicked with total destruction. During the reign of Zedekiah, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and took most of the people into captivity. Lehi and his family left Jerusalem because the Lord warned him of the impending destruction of the city. After the crucifixion of the Savior, Jerusalem was again leveled by the Romans.

Each incident clearly shows the wrath of God, but each also shows his love. In every instance the destruction comes as a result of evil which has moved beyond the always-offered repentance. The time of Noah is described thus: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). If the thought of every heart was continual evil, what would have been the possibility of repentance, of humanity returning to Christ “as chickens to the hen”? The law of justice demanded the annihilation of the whole earth, and the floods came.

The story of Lot details the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah more specifically. It was not just ordinary men who visited Lot, but three angelic messengers who came to lead Lot and his family from the wicked cities to safety (JST Gen 19:1). However, the sacred character of the visitors did not protect them against the perverted lust of the men who gathered at Lot’s door. Even Lot’s pleading to spare his virgin daughters to their evil desires did not deter the citizens of Sodom (19:9–15), described in the Old Testament as “both old and young, all the people from every quarter” (Gen 19:4). Only when the angels struck them blind did they stop, and then only because “they wearied themselves to find the door” (v 11). Any possibility of repentant souls in this crowd? Once Lot and his wife and daughters were removed, leaving the unbelieving sons-in-law behind, the in-

habitants of Sodom and Gomorrah reaped the consequences of their choice of lifestyle—death. And in this case, through fire and brimstone from heaven.

The various destructions of Jerusalem followed a similar pattern: of four kings who reigned in Jerusalem at the time Babylon destroyed the city, the scriptures say of each one, “And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done” (2 Kings 23:32). The evil included worshiping idols, serving Baal by sacrificing their children to this god, sometimes killing the prophets, but always rejecting them and the covenants made with the Lord. Still the Lord called them to repent:

Yet the Lord testified against Israel, and against Judah, by all the prophets, and by all the seers, saying, Turn ye from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets. Notwithstanding they would not hear, but hardened their necks, like to the neck of their fathers, that did not believe in the Lord their God. (17:13–14)

In every instance, the people refused to repent and destruction eventually followed.

The Book of Mormon repeats the same pattern: great wickedness followed by great destruction. Three examples will suffice. King Noah and his court were overcome by the Lamanites and fled the land of Nephi with all their people. Those who refused to leave wives and children behind when the Lamanites overtook them were eventually restored to their own country, but only as semi-slaves, paying half their income as tribute to their captors (Mosiah 19). Later the great city of Ammonihah and all her people were destroyed in one day as punishment for their great evil as the prophet Alma² had prophesied. But these instances pale compared to the massive destruction visited upon most of the existing cities at the time of Christ’s visit to the Nephites. After his crucifixion, these cities were wiped from the face of the earth, not by a hostile army which could be resisted, but by a variety of natural disasters against which the people

were powerless and which therefore must have been more terrifying than any Lamanite army would have been (3 Nephi 8).

The Book of Mormon accounts also show a people who rejected the prophets and refused repentance. King Noah yielded to the counsel of his wicked priests and condemned Abinadi to the fire. And when Alma, who believed God's prophet, began to convert other souls, baptizing them in secret, the king sent his army against them and they fled for their lives (Mosiah 17–18). The people of Ammonihah were so proud they could not even conceive that the warning of Alma², and Amulek could be true—that their mighty city could be destroyed (Alma 9:4). They imprisoned the two prophets but could not kill them because God protected them. But the citizens of Ammonihah were able to seal their doom by burning the few righteous who still lived in the city (14:3–28). Even the idea of repentance was far from Ammonihah; the people refused to acknowledge that they had any sins (15:15).

Finally, the extensive destruction which occurred in conjunction with Christ's crucifixion came as a result of willful rebellion against God. In the thirtieth year after the birth of Christ, wickedness had reached a zenith. Mormon says of the Nephites: "Now they did not sin ignorantly, for they knew the will of God concerning them, for it had been taught unto them; therefore they did wilfully rebel against God" (3 Nephi 6:18).

In the face of such wickedness, the Lord again sent his prophets to reprove the people for their sins, to call them to repentance, and to testify of Christ's death, suffering, and resurrection. Not only did the people reject the prophets, but these servants of the Lord were secretly seized and put to death by corrupt judges, violating the law that required the governor's signature in order to condemn anyone to death. When called to account for their actions, the judges, their friends and kindred, entered into the covenant with Satan which had existed since the days of Cain, to "combine against all righteousness" (3 Nephi 6:20–28). They murdered the governor, overthrew the

government, and elected Jacob, an anti-Christ, as their king. Nephi was called by God to gather in the few who would hear the call to repentance before the terrible destruction came in the thirty-third year, the time when the Savior was crucified.

The disasters which destroyed the Nephite cities were the natural result of the wickedness of the people. President Joseph Fielding Smith has equated such calamities as earthquakes, pestilence, drought, and devouring fire, with wickedness. Speaking of the dust bowl which occurred in the 1930's and a terrible earthquake in a far off land which had taken thousands of lives, President Joseph Fielding Smith declared, "It is because men violate the commandments of God and refuse to hearken unto his word; . . . It is not the will of the Lord that there should come upon the people disaster, trouble, calamity, and depression . . . but because man himself will violate the commandments of God and will not walk in righteousness, the Lord permits all of these evils to come upon him" (3:27-28).

Throughout the history of humankind the pattern remains the same. The people fall from righteousness to wickedness, the Lord sends his prophets to offer his gift of love—repentance—and sometimes it is accepted. But when it is not, when the prophets and the righteous are banished or killed, then the law of justice demands that those responsible be punished, the blood of the prophets and the saints cry out and the Lord hears. Not only do the wicked refuse to repent, but they create a society that works against righteousness in anyone. How could a child in Ammonihah or Sodom learn to obey God? By allowing such societies to continue, the Lord would condemn generations to the power of Satan. And in an ironic way, destruction, per se, can be seen as evidence of God's love. Since those who fail to repent will be consigned to spirit prison after death and must suffer for their sins since they have not accepted Christ's atonement, to cut short their sinning is an act of mercy. Death may be the beginning of wisdom for the wicked.

If repentance is the gift of love, then sin must be the failure of love. This interpretation of sin is suggested by the answer

Jesus gave to his questioners when they asked him to state the great commandment. Jesus replied: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matt 22:37–40). If all law hangs on love for God and humanity, then breaking the law, sin, must be a failure of love.

Even a cursory glance at some major, and even minor sins, reveals the truth of this statement. Murder, the most serious crime, is certainly never committed by a heart filled with love. Anger, hatred, a coldly evil seeking of personal advantage motivates murder. Adultery occurs when a husband or wife fails to love the other enough to resist temptation, and does not love the partner in sin enough to resist damaging his or her spiritual well-being. In idolatry, the sin of the moderns as well as of the Israelites, one loves some other god or some other thing more than the Lord. Thieves love the things they steal, but not God nor those they steal from. Backbiters delight in injuring the object of their gossip, in giving tongue to their hatred. They who dig a pit for their neighbors certainly do not labor for love. Even pride, which might be called the original sin of Satan, President Ezra Taft Benson has defined as “enmity toward God and man.” As he said, quoting C. S. Lewis from *Mere Christianity*, “Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man” (Benson 4). Whatever sin we can think of—bearing false witness, failing to honor father and mother, bowing down before other gods, coveting what belongs to others, lying, refusing aid to those in need, having a contentious spirit—all spring from a failure to love humankind and the Lord.

How then does repentance remove the sin, the failure to love? How does it operate? It must begin with a change of heart from hostility or indifference toward God and humankind to love unfeigned for both. When we realize that we have injured someone we love, we automatically feel sorrow. Thus when we

recognize our sin, when we know that we have injured someone else and by so doing have injured the Lord, we feel a godly sorrow, not just a sorrow that we made a mistake, but a genuine remorse that someone else has suffered because of us.

With that attitude it goes without saying that we will cease doing what has caused the injury and seek pardon from the injured parties, both God and man or woman. This involves confession—the acknowledgement that we are responsible for the injury and that we accept the blame without equivocation. If possible, we will restore what those injured have lost by our action. If it is something physical, money or land or other property, a generous restoration may resolve the problem and restore good feeling between us and the victim of our sin. But if it is something more difficult to restore—trust, self-esteem, reputation, virtue, or even life itself—then we must patiently endure the suffering which will be ours until trust can be rebuilt, self-esteem mended, reputation cleared. The impossibility of restoring virtue or life once they have been taken explains why these are such serious sins. President Joseph F. Smith has explained, “When we cannot make restitution for the wrong we have done, then we must apply for the grace and mercy of God to cleanse us from that iniquity” (98).

But in all instances, repentance requires suffering, an emotion often associated with love. President Spencer W. Kimball has said, “Suffering is a very important part of repentance. One has not begun to repent until he has suffered intensely for his sins” (88). And that suffering grows out of love; we will not knowingly injure those we love, and when we come to love the Lord and our neighbor and realize that we have injured them, sorrow is inevitable. We must replace hostility or indifference with love that strives to emulate Christ’s love. That is why repentance is so difficult.

We must make love for our fellow beings and God motivate all our actions. If we have cheated our neighbors, repentance not only demands that we stop cheating them and restore what we have taken, but that we henceforth look out for their welfare,

help them when they have need, become our neighbor's keeper, treat them with a Christlike love and concern. If we have betrayed friend or family, then we must confess and make every effort to show our love and devotion in small ways and large. Sacrifice and service do much to restore trust and confidence when given from a loving heart and with no thought of what the giver might gain. When these changes have been accomplished, we may then receive the Lord's forgiveness and mercy.

Thus, a true understanding of repentance shows us that God's laws are an expression of his love for us, that even his punishments come from this love and fulfill the law of justice which lack of repentance demands. Repentance is an eternal expression of the Savior's love: he has gathered, he would gather, and he will gather his repentant children to the shelter of his outstretched arms. As President Joseph F. Smith said:

Men cannot forgive their own sins; they cannot cleanse themselves from the consequences of their sins. Men can stop sinning and can do right in the future, and so far their acts are acceptable before the Lord and worthy of consideration. But who shall repair the wrongs they have done to themselves and to others, which it seems impossible for them to repair themselves? By the atonement of Jesus Christ the sins of the repentant shall be washed away; though they be crimson they shall be made white as wool. This is the promise given to you. . . . That is generous and kind [and loving], and I feel grateful for it. (98–99)

The Lord offers us his grace; our love for him expressed in repentance allows us to fully accept it. His beautiful promise is recorded in 3 Nephi 22:8: "In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment, but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer."

The result of the repentance Christ calls for in the last verse of the last chapter of 3 Nephi is depicted in 4 Nephi which recounts the history of the people after Christ visited them. The year following his visit, his disciples organized his church in all the lands about them and the rule of love prevailed. Mormon describes the society of the repentant:

And it came to pass in the thirty and sixth year, the people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another. . . . And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift. . . . (4 Nephi 1:2–3, 15)

And the heavenly gift lasted two hundred years because their repentance was continual. Their love for God and their fellowbeing created a society which heeded the Lord's call to repent, which accepted the gift of his love, a society which knew peace and joy—the fruits of repentance.

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