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KnoWhy #311 - How Can One Overcome The Natural Man?

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Abstract: King Benjamin’s inspired speech in Mosiah 2–5 is rich with parallelisms, chiasmus, and other literary techniques that highlight and emphasize core doctrinal principles. One such doctrinal subject is the Fall, which Benjamin emphasizes in a chiastic frame at Mosiah 3:18–19. According to Benjamin’s formulation, the Fall of Adam and Eve, with the result that the natural (fallen) man is an “enemy to God,” can only be overcome through the Atonement of Jesus Christ by “putting off the natural man.” But beyond merely conveying this crucial doctrine, Benjamin added poetic depth to this teaching through his skilled use of chiastic structuring.



"For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father."
Mosiah 3:19

Image via unsplash.com

How Can One Overcome the Natural Man?

Context and Content

King Benjamin organized his famous speech (Mosiah 2–5) with literary patterns meant to highlight and reinforce important teachings.¹ His teachings about the “natural man” are found literally at the very heart and center of his entire speech (Mosiah 3:19), highlighting its central importance. Within that pattern, Mosiah 3:18–19 itself forms a chiasm in which key words, phrases, or ideas are repeated in reverse order.²

Men drink damnation to their own souls except
 A they *humble* themselves

B and become as little *children*

C and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the *atonement of Christ*, the Lord Omnipotent.

D For the *natural man*

E is an enemy to *God*

F and *has been* from the fall of Adam

F and *will be*, forever and ever

E unless he yields to the enticings of the *Holy Spirit*

D and putteth off the *natural man*

C and becometh a saint through the *atonement of Christ* the Lord

B and becometh as a *child*

A submissive, meek, *humble*, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father. (Mosiah 3:18–19)³

This pattern sandwiches the state of the natural man between references to the Atonement, becoming like a child, and humility. In the second half of the pattern, *submission* becomes a key concept, with the terms *yields*, *submissive*, and *submit* (repeated twice) appearing four times.⁴ As part of the larger organization of his speech, Benjamin stressed that the *name* of Christ is the *only* means of salvation, emphasizing this both shortly before and shortly after this passage (Mosiah 3:17, 21).

The terminology of childhood also plays a significant role in Benjamin’s speech. His discourse to his people is prefaced with his counsel to his children (Mosiah 1:2–8), and both the singular and plural forms of *child*, *son*, and *daughter* appear 41 times throughout Mosiah 1–6.⁵ This language is thematically important since Benjamin had just crowned his son as king (Mosiah 2:30). In ancient Israel, the king became the son or child of the Lord when he was crowned.⁶ But Benjamin extended this privilege to all of his people, declaring:

And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the *children of Christ*, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have *become his sons and his daughters*. (Mosiah 5:7, emphasis added)

Doctrine and Principles

The essence of the gospel and the plan of salvation are clearly and simply laid out in this compact, carefully written, and well organized passage, placed at the very center of Benjamin's powerful address. Key doctrines and principles, such as the Fall, the role of the Holy Ghost, repentance, and power of the Atonement, are all taught within this single passage.

Due to the Fall, *all* are naturally enemies to God.⁷ The grip of this condition is emphasized at the center of the pattern, but then the passage thematically reverses this point and presents *submission* as the only way to overcome the Fall. The "enemy to God" must "yield to the enticings of the Holy Spirit," and "submit to all things," even if this means that heavy burdens must be borne (Mosiah 24:15).

Submission can be manifest in a variety of ways. The giving of loving acts of service, for example, is one way to put off the selfish desires of the natural man and fulfill the Lord's will, as explained by Elder Benjamin De Hoyos:

We can submit our flesh to the will of the Father when we forget our own needs and relinquish our own comfort; when we make time to visit others, including new converts who need to be "nourished by the good word of God" (Moro. 6:4); or when we "succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees" (D&C 81:5).⁸

The act of humbly submitting to the will of the Lord is ultimately what it means to repent. After quoting Mosiah 3:19, Elder Russell M. Nelson taught, "Brothers and sisters, that means conversion! Repentance is conversion! A repentant soul is a converted soul, and a converted soul is a repentant soul."⁹

In this process, the Holy Spirit "entices" the natural man to become a holy man,¹⁰ or "saint," by submitting to God. Yet it is only through the atoning blood of Christ the Lord Omnipotent that the transformation from natural man to saint can occur. The Atonement itself was achieved through Christ's submission to the Father's will (Mosiah 15:2), and it empowers and purifies all who meekly submit to the Father. Through the atoning grace and work of Christ, patient individuals are reborn—they become as children because they are

now *His* children.¹¹ Elder D. Todd Christofferson bore witness:

I testify that as you continue in the path of spiritual rebirth, the atoning grace of Jesus Christ will take away your sins and the stain of those sins in you, temptations will lose their appeal, and through Christ you will become holy, as He and our Father are holy.¹²

Further Reading

Elder D. Todd Christofferson, "Born Again," *Ensign*, May 2008, 76–79.

Elder Russell M. Nelson, "Repentance and Conversion," *Ensign*, May 2007, 102–105.

Elder Benjamin De Hoyos, "Book of Mormon Principles: Submitting Our Will to the Father's," *Ensign*, July 2004, online at lds.org.

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Notes

1. See John W. Welch, "Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin's Speech," in *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom"*, ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 315–410.
2. Welch, "Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin's Speech," 319–324, 326–327, 350, 352, 373–376. For more on chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, see Book of Mormon Central, "Why is the Presence of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon Significant? (Mosiah 5:10–12)," *KnoWhy* 166 (August 16, 2016). This chiasm was one of the first to be detected in the Book of Mormon by Welch fifty years ago on August 16, 1967, and first published in John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (1969): 69–83; see also John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981; reprint Provo, UT: Research Press, 1999), 198–210; John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1982; reprint Provo, UT: FARMS, 1996), 33–52.
3. Adapted from Welch, "Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin's Speech," 350, 352. See also, Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007), 166.
4. See D. Kelly Ogden, *Verse by Verse: The Book of Mormon*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2011), 1:314.
5. Determined by searching for the terms *child*, *son*, and *daughter* in the Book of Mormon on lds.org.
6. Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2012), 26–31.
7. See Robert L. Millet, "The Natural Man: An Enemy to God," in *Mosiah, Salvation Only Through Christ*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr., The Book of Mormon Symposium Series, Volume 5 (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1991), 139–159; Rodney Turner, "The Great Conversion," in *The Book of Mormon, Part 1: 1 Nephi to Alma* 29, ed. Kent P. Jackson, Studies in Scripture, Volume 7 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1987), 217–218.
8. Elder Benjamin De Hoyos, "Book of Mormon Principles: Submitting Our Will to the Father's," *Ensign*, July 2004, online at lds.org.
9. Elder Russell M. Nelson, "Repentance and Conversion," *Ensign*, May 2007, 104.
10. Turner, "The Great Conversion," 218.
11. John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar*, 2nd edition (Springville, UT: Horizon, 2003), 253.
12. Elder D. Todd Christofferson, "Born Again," *Ensign*, May 2008, 78.