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KnoWhy #350 - How Does Grace Help Us Overcome Weakness?

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Abstract: In Ether 12, Christ told Moroni that if men would come unto Him, He would show them their “weakness.” Some might assume this means that Christ would show us our weaknesses. However, the Book of Mormon authors never use the word weaknesses at all. Instead, they use the word weakness to refer to the actual condition of being weak: weak-ness. The Lord allows people to experience this weakness associated with mortality, “that they may be humble” (Ether 12:27). We all experience the weakened condition that is part of being human, and this is meant to invite us to experience Christ’s grace.



How Does Grace Help Us Overcome Weakness?

“And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.” Ether 12:27

Context and Content

In Ether 12, the prophet Moroni told the Lord he was worried that the Book of Mormon might not be as good as he had hoped because of his own imperfections and weakness in writing. In response, the Lord told Moroni that, “if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27). Understanding this verse can help all of us know how to access God’s help and allow Christ’s grace to support us through our difficulties in life.¹

Christ told Moroni that if men would come unto Him, He would show them their “weakness.” Some might assume this means that Christ would show us our weaknesses. Notice, however, that the Lord uses the word *weakness* not *weaknesses*. In fact, Book of Mormon authors *never* used the word *weaknesses*.² Instead, they use the word *weakness*, not to talk about a specific weakness that a person might have, but about the *condition* of being weak: weak-ness.

Helaman, for example, stated that “God will deliver us, notwithstanding the weakness of our armies” (Alma 58:37). In this passage, Helaman makes it clear that he is not referring to one specific weakness that everyone in his army shared. Rather, he is commenting on the fewer number of soldiers in his army compared to the size of the Lamanite army. This concept appears to be what Moroni was referring to in Ether 12 as well. Moroni stated that, compared to the Jaredite writings, “when we [the Nephites] write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words.” The Lord responded, “Fools mock, but they shall mourn; and my grace is sufficient for the meek, that they shall take no advantage of your weakness” (Ether 12:25–26).³

Looking at Ether 12:27 with the verse from Alma in mind, it becomes clear that He is talking about the weakness that all people experience in mortality, not specific weaknesses that God gives us. The Lord allows people to experience this weakness associated with mortality, “that they may be humble” (Ether 12:27). The Lord then clarifies that this humility is essential if we want to experience grace in our lives: “my grace is sufficient for

all men that humble themselves before me” (v. 27). It is significant that the text does not simply read, “and my grace is sufficient for all.” Christ’s grace is only fully effective in the lives of all those “that humble themselves before” Him.⁴

The Book of Mormon teaches that grace is conditional upon the individual having the humility to accept it. For example, 2 Nephi 10:24 states, “After ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved.” This implies that men and women must first reconcile themselves to God by humbling themselves in order to experience Christ’s grace.⁵ When people humble themselves before God and have faith in Him, Christ promised that He will make “weak things become strong unto them.”

In the Old Testament, the concept of grace also carried with it the idea of strength. One sees this in Nehemiah 9:32 where the Hebrew word for God’s grace is used in parallel with God being “the great, the mighty, and the terrible God,” emphasizing power and strength as part of grace.⁶ One can also see this concept in Jacob 4:6–7, which states that those with appropriate faith “can command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey us, or the mountains, or the waves of the sea.” Thus, when Moroni states that weak things can become strong through grace, it is because grace itself is associated with strength.⁷

Doctrine and Principles

When we understand that the Book of Mormon use of the word “weakness” means the condition of being weaker than we wish we were, a condition we all experience in life, Ether 12:27 takes on a new meaning. We all experience the weakened condition that is part of being human, and this is meant to invite us to humility. In our humility, we acknowledge that it is our own weak and fallen condition that opens the door to the grace of Jesus in our lives.⁸

Ultimately, “as we come to Him in faith, the Savior will strengthen us to bear our burdens and accomplish tasks that we could not do on our own.”⁹ If we will humble ourselves and come to Christ, he will help us to overcome our “weak-ness” through His grace and power. Because grace is so closely connected to strength, we can all be strengthened by the grace of Christ, and have faith that we as “weak things” can become strong.¹⁰

Sharing a covenant relationship with the Lord gives us access to abilities beyond our own capacity, through his might and mercy.

As Elder David A. Bednar stated, “Thus, the enabling and strengthening aspect of the Atonement helps us to see and to do and to become good in ways that we could never recognize or accomplish with our limited mortal capacity. I testify and witness that the enabling power of the Savior’s Atonement is real.”¹¹

Further Reading

David A. Bednar, “Bear Up Their Burdens with Ease,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 87–90.

L. Whitney Clayton, “That Your Burdens May Be Light,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 12–14.

David A. Bednar, “In the Strength of the Lord,” *Ensign*, November 2004, 76–78.

Notes

1. For a thorough discussion of this verse, see Carolyn J. Rasmus, “Weak Things Made Strong,” in *Fourth Nephi Through Moroni, From Zion to Destruction*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., Book of Mormon Symposium Series, Volume 9 (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1995), 251–262.
2. Eldin Ricks’s *Thorough Concordance of the LDS Standard Works* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1995), 829.
3. Royal Skousen has noted that the following verse explains that the love of God brings people to Christ and helps them to overcome the weakness of mortality. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part Six, 3 Nephi 8–Moroni 10*, 2nd edition, The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project, Volume 4 (Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2017), 3970–3971.
4. Joseph Fielding McConkie, Robert L. Millet, and Brent L. Top, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1987–1992), 4:212–213.
5. The verse specifically notes that this is the grace of Jesus Christ, while the Book of Mormon sometimes refers to the grace of God more generally. See Stephen E. Robinson, “Grace,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2003), 306.
6. Brent J. Schmidt, *Relational Grace* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 149.
7. See Isaiah 40:6, where the word *chesed* is translated as “goodliness” in the King James Version, and refers to the strength of grass: the next verse notes that the grass doesn’t have any strength.
8. Bruce C. Hafen, “Grace,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1992), 2:562–563.
9. *Doctrinal Mastery: Core Document* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 6.
10. M. Catherine Thomas, “A More Excellent Way,” in *Book of Mormon, Part 2: Alma 30 to Moroni*, ed. Kent P. Jackson, Studies in Scripture: Volume 8 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1988), 276.
11. David A. Bednar, “In the Strength of the Lord,” *Ensign*, November 2004, 77.