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ALMA'S CONVERSION: REMINISCENCES IN HIS SERMONS

S. Kent Brown

The sermons of Alma deserve at least a fraction of the centuries-long attention that the epistles of the Apostle Paul have received. Alma's recorded sermons, whether formal or spontaneous, weave a tapestry of complex and variegated colors, of rich imagery, and yet of a bold and simple unity that holds in tight focus the unspeakable blessings of accepting the Atonement of Jesus Christ. This chapter looks at only one of the colorful strands woven into Alma's sermons, that of reminiscences of his conversion experience: the three days during which he was completely unconscious, after the unexpected appearance of the angel of the Lord to him and several friends (see Mosiah 27; Alma 36). To be sure, students of the Book of Mormon have long recognized that Alma's life-changing, three-day experience stood at the foundation of all that he did and said for the rest of his life. But unlike Moses and Isaiah, who almost never referred to their life-changing experiences, Alma's memory of that remarkable ordeal was present with him to the point that all his sermons are infused with allusions to it.

The passage that describes Alma's conversion experience in most detail, beginning with the appearance of the angel and recounting

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events of the next three days, is chapter 36 of his book. Importantly, we have a second narration of the angel's words and the resulting impact on Alma in chapter 27 of the book of Mosiah. Moreover, this same passage records some of the words that Alma spoke immediately following his experience (see Mosiah 27:24–31). Because the angel's utterance is important for our study, and because by his own admission Alma did not hear all that the angel said—"the angel spake more things unto me, which were heard by my brethren, but I did not hear them; . . . I fell to the earth and I did hear no more" (Alma 36:11)—I shall borrow from the account in Mosiah 27 to fill in the picture.

ALMA'S CONVERSION STORY: ALMA 36

Alma's personal recollection, recounted to his oldest son, Helaman, exhibits a number of features that appear in Alma's later sermons and extemporaneous addresses. Let me briefly summarize Alma 36 since it forms a principal key to understanding a pattern of reminiscences in Alma's sermons and sermonettes. One significant element consists of his emphasis on God's deliverance of His people, whether they be the children of Israel from Egypt, Lehi's family from Jerusalem, or others (see Alma 36:2, 28–29). A second element, which borrows language from the first, is Alma's stress on God's deliverance of the individual soul from the bondage of sin (see Alma 36:17–18). A third ingredient, related to the second, consists of a set of expressions that describe Alma's own troubled and sinful state before he received forgiveness of his sins. In this instance, he describes himself as "racked with eternal torment," "tormented with the pains of hell" and "encircled about by the everlasting chains of death" (Alma 36:12–13, 18). Associated directly with his torment, and evidently a part of it, was his feeling of "inexpressible horror" at the thought of standing "in the presence of my God, to be judged of my deeds" (Alma 36:14–15). A fourth component turns out to be the exact reversal of the third: indescribable joy and enlightenment at receiving forgiveness of sins through Jesus' atonement (see Alma 36:19–21). A fifth feature is his persistent description of his experience as being "born of God," a phrase that is distinctive to Alma among Book of Mormon authors (see Mosiah 27:25, 28; Alma

5:14; 36:5, 23–24, 26; 38:6) just as Alma is unique among Book of Mormon writers in using the phrases, “born of the Spirit” and “born again” (see Mosiah 27:24–25; Alma 5:49; 7:14). A sixth element arises from his actions as a preacher of salvation, which followed his extraordinary experience, bringing others to taste “as I have tasted” and to see “eye to eye as I have seen” (see Alma 36:26).

SERMON IN ZARAHEMLA: ALMA 5

The initial test of whether these observations had an impact on Alma’s preaching comes in his first recorded sermon (Alma 5), a long and carefully articulated address delivered, presumably over a period of time and on various occasions, to “the people in the church which was established in the city of Zarahemla” (Alma 5:2), possibly consisting of seven or more congregations (see Mosiah 25:23). As one might expect, most of the elements listed above are present in the opening segment of Alma’s discourse. After establishing his divine authority for preaching (see Alma 5:3), he noted that the Exodus-like deliverances of his immediate ancestors were illustrations of God’s “mercy and long-suffering” and that it was important to remember these divine acts (Alma 5:4–6). On this note, he next asked his hearers, “Have ye sufficiently retained in remembrance that [God] has delivered their souls from hell?” (Alma 5:6). In framing this question, Alma effectively shifted the focus of his listeners from the Exodus and other such events to the Atonement by borrowing the language of the former to describe the latter. Specifically, Alma’s use of the verb *deliver* in this context formed a firm bridge between his reference to the Exodus and his recounting of the blessings that flow from accepting the Atonement, a discussion of which immediately follows (see Alma 5:7–27).

As a further illustration of a pattern of reminiscences in this sermon, Alma’s vocabulary in his discourse on the Atonement exhibits clear ties to his account of the aftermath of his encounter with the angel in Alma 36. There he spoke initially of being “racked with eternal torment” and “tormented with the pains of hell” at the memory of his sins (Alma 36:12–13), and being “encircled about by the everlasting chains of death” (Alma 36:18). Because the “thought of coming into the presence

of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror," Alma had wished to "become extinct both soul and body, that I might not be brought to stand in the presence of my God, to be judged of my deeds" (Alma 36:14–15). Then, as he described his feelings of receiving a remission of sins, he spoke in opposite terms of the "joy, and . . . marvelous light I did behold," as well as of a vision of "God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God." Alma exclaimed, "My soul did long to be there" (Alma 36:20, 22). Moreover, he talked of being "born of God" and wanting to share the joy and happiness he had received (Alma 36:23–24). Importantly, the early part of his Zarahemla speech follows a similar pattern. After noting God's deliverance of His people, the children of Israel, Alma described the ancestors of his hearers as being "encircled about by the bands of death, and the chains of hell, and an everlasting destruction did await them" (Alma 5:7). In counterbalance, he next affirmed that these forebears were not destroyed or lost; rather, the "bands of death" and "chains of hell . . . were loosed, and their souls did expand, and they did sing redeeming love" (Alma 5:8–10). Then speaking of his father, Alma noted that that there had been "a mighty change wrought in his heart" (Alma 5:12), as there had been in his own and he asked the congregation whether they themselves had been "born of God" (Alma 5:14), a phrase that he had used to describe himself. His mentioning the "song of redeeming love" (Alma 5: 9, 26) seems to be tied to the vision of God and His angels that he had seen and heard at the end of his three days of torment. That he had wanted to join in the singing is evidence of this change (see Alma 36:22).

SERMON IN GIDEON: ALMA 7

Alma's next recorded sermon appears in chapter 7. It is much shorter and less formal. He delivered it in the land of Gideon, which was apparently settled by the faithful people from the colony of Limhi whom he had known as a child. Because the sermon is chiefly an address to faithful friends, a clear patterning of reminiscences does not emerge as it does in the first section of the Zarahemla sermon. Even

though the tone throughout Alma 7 is generally warm and informal, certain elements do exhibit formal language which, in Alma's words, came at the behest of the Spirit. For instance, the phrases "the Spirit hath said this much unto me" (Alma 7:9) and "for the Spirit saith" (Alma 7:14) clearly set out the authority and necessity for Alma's commanding words in verses 9 and 14 through 16. However, elements that echo Alma's experience do appear. For example, when speaking of the necessity of repenting he said that one must "be born again" (Alma 7:14), a phrase that uniquely characterizes Alma's messages elsewhere. Further, he said that the Lamb of God is "mighty to save" (Alma 7:14), a phrase that recalls similar language describing God's redeeming power manifested in the Exodus of the children of Israel (see Exodus 32:11; Deuteronomy 4:37; 7:8; 9:26). In another place, he spoke of looking forward "for the remission of your sins . . . which is to come" (Alma 7:6), possibly a recollection of his own remission of sins (see Alma 36:19–21).

SERMON IN AMMONIHAH: ALMA 9–13

Alma's third recorded sermon, which occupies most of chapter 9, was delivered under contentious conditions in the city of Ammonihah. In an effort to postpone arrest (see Alma 9:7), he opened his address by scolding his listeners for not remembering "that our father, Lehi, was brought out of Jerusalem by the hand of God" (Alma 9:9). The same point is made twice in Alma 9:22. The description of the Son of God as one who will be "quick to hear the cries of his people" (Alma 9:26) also exhibits ties to the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt: God heard the cries of the children of Israel (see Exodus 3:7, 9; see also Exodus 6:5). That Alma raised the issue of remembering "the captivity of [their] fathers" illustrates that Alma was obedient to the angel's command that he remember it (see Mosiah 27:16) and that he felt it important to observe this instruction in his preaching (see Alma 36:2, 28–29). His subsequent reference to "a state of endless misery and woe" for the unrepentant, and his warning that God "will utterly destroy you from off the face of the earth" (Alma 9:11–12) both recall the misery that Alma felt and the destruction that he feared during his three-day ordeal

(see Alma 36:11–16). Moreover, the reason for warning the people of Ammonihah of impending divine annihilation was the same as the angel's reason for threatening Alma and his brethren with destruction: so that they would no longer lead others astray, a notion also at home in the Exodus (see Deuteronomy 20:17–18). The words of the angel to Alma were: "If thou wilt of thyself be destroyed, seek no more to destroy the church of God" (Alma 36:9, 11). To the people of Ammonihah Alma said in turn, "If ye persist in your wickedness . . . ye shall be visited with utter destruction. . . . For [God] will not suffer you that ye shall live in your iniquities, to destroy his people" (Alma 9:18–19).

In contrast, God's wondrous power to deliver was not only apparent in the orchestrated escapes of His people in the past but also in "the salvation of their souls" which comes about "according to the power and deliverance of Jesus Christ" (Alma 9:28). Once again, the focus on terms such as *power* and *deliverance* recollects Exodus-like events while at the same time describing the most marvelous of all deliverances, the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Finally, Alma's reference to the Final Judgment recalls another element in his description of his three-day ordeal. To the people of the city he issued this warning: "I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable for [the Lamanites] in the day of judgment than for you, if ye remain in your sins" (Alma 9:15). The sense is clear. For the people of Ammonihah, the Judgment would be terrible. On this matter, Alma could speak with poignant feeling. When he had been forced into a harried contemplation of his own sins, Alma came to wish that he "could be banished and become extinct both soul and body, that I might not be brought to stand in the presence of my God, to be judged of my deeds" (Alma 36:15).

On the same day that Alma was obliged to deliver his sermon under contentious conditions to the people of Ammonihah (see Alma 9), he spontaneously responded to questions raised by several persons (Alma 12–13), including Zeezrom, a lawyer and skilled speaker who had openly opposed the preaching of Alma and his companion Amulek (see Alma 10:31). While no real pattern of reminiscences emerges from Alma's extemporaneous words, three elements that can be tied to Alma's three-day conversion experience are readily identifiable. One has to do

with the prophetic function of angels, clearly recalling the role of the angel of the Lord who confronted Alma and his companions. In an apparent effort to assure his listeners that divine powers were then declaring repentance and salvation among his own people, Alma observed that “the voice of the Lord, by the mouth of angels, doth declare [salvation] unto all nations; . . . wherefore they [the angels] have come unto us” (Alma 13:22). Further, “angels are declaring [salvation] unto many at this time in our land” (Alma 13:24). Why? Because, said Alma, “at the time of [the Messiah’s] coming” His arrival will “be made known unto just and holy men, by the mouth of angels” (Alma 13:24–26).

The second element deals with a notion that one might expect from Alma when one considers the character of his audience in Ammonihah: the terrible, eternal fate that awaits those unrepentant individuals who do not accept Jesus’ Atonement. On this topic, Alma speaks of the wicked coming to be “bound down by the chains of hell” (Alma 13:30; see also Alma 12:17), echoing the description of his nightmarish vision of being “encircled about by the everlasting chains of death” (Alma 36:18; see also Moses 7:26–27). To the people of Ammonihah, Alma had a good deal to say about such chains. By his words the devil, or adversary, seeks to “encircle you about with his chains, that he might chain you down to everlasting destruction” (Alma 12:6). Alma then spelled out what he meant by the word *chains*. Speaking of those who harden their hearts, he proclaimed that they consequently receive “the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning [God’s] mysteries; and then they are taken captive by the devil, and led by his will down to destruction.” This situation, Alma disclosed, “is what is meant by the chains of hell” (Alma 12:10–11).

Closely related to this second element is a third that concerns the scene at the judgment bar of God. Of his own torment, Alma said that the thought of standing before God “did rack my soul with inexpressible horror” and brought him to wish that he “could be banished and become extinct both soul and body” (Alma 36:14–15). To the people of Ammonihah, Alma made a similar point: “If we have hardened

our hearts against the word, . . . then will our state be awful. . . . And in this awful state we shall not dare to look up to our God" (Alma 12:13–14). Moreover, sharing Alma's one-time desire to become extinct, those who persist in their sins "would fain be glad if [they] could command the rocks and the mountains to fall upon [them] to hide [them] from his presence" (Alma 12:14). In addition, those who come thus to the judgment bar of God will do so with "everlasting shame" (Alma 12:15).

As a capstone to this spontaneous address, Alma pled with his audience from the memory of the fearful experience through which he had suffered. Near the end he besought them, "Now, my brethren, I wish from the *inmost part of my heart*, yea, with *great anxiety even unto pain*, that ye would hearken unto my words, and cast off your sins, and not procrastinate the day of your repentance" (Alma 13:27; emphasis added). Because of his own ordeal, he knew better than most about the terrible consequences facing those who reject the message of salvation. In the case of the people of Ammonihah, Alma's dire prophecies were fulfilled when an invading Lamanite army destroyed the city and all of its inhabitants in a single day (see Alma 16:1–3, 9–11).

ALMA'S SOLILOQUY: ALMA 29

Alma's soliloquy in chapter 29 also exhibits reminiscences of his three-day experience. First, he wishes that he were an angel and, like the angel of the Lord who confronted him, he wishes he could "go forth and speak . . . with a voice to shake the earth, . . . as with the voice of thunder" (Alma 29:1–2). The descriptions of the appearance of the angel of the Lord to Alma and his friends are compelling. In his own words, Alma recounted: "God sent his holy angel to stop us by the way. And behold, he spake unto us, as it were the voice of thunder, and the whole earth did tremble beneath our feet" (Alma 36:6–7).

The account from other witnesses says that "the angel of the Lord appeared unto them; . . . and he spake as it were with a voice of thunder, which caused the earth to shake upon which they stood" (Mosiah 27:11). The similarities cannot be missed. They combine mention of

the angel with reference to his thundering voice and the resulting earthquake.

The reference to the captivity of Alma's forebears forms a second tie. In his soliloquy Alma says:

"I also remember the captivity of my fathers; for I surely do know that the Lord did deliver them out of bondage. . . .

"Yea, I have always remembered the captivity of my fathers; and that same God who delivered them out of the hands of the Egyptians did deliver them out of bondage" (Alma 29:11–12).

At this point, we recall the angel's instructions to Alma: "Go, and remember the captivity of thy fathers . . . for they were in bondage, and [God] has delivered them" (Mosiah 27:16).

Alma's service as a divine instrument in bringing others to God comprises a third connection. In his soliloquy Alma declared:

"This is my glory, that perhaps I may be an instrument in the hands of God to bring some soul to repentance; and this is my joy.

"And behold, when I see many of my brethren truly penitent, and coming to the Lord their God, then is my soul filled with joy" (Alma 29:9–10).

Similarly, in his personal recounting Alma told his son Helaman that from the time of his three-day ordeal until that moment, "I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste" (Alma 36:24). He continued by speaking metaphorically of his success in his missionary endeavors as if it were fruit of agricultural labors:

"The Lord doth give me exceedingly great joy in the fruit of my labors;

"For because of the word which he has imparted unto me, behold, many have been born of God, and have tasted as I have tasted, and have seen eye to eye as I have seen" (Alma 36:25–26; see also Alma 29:13–15).

A fourth component, related to the third, may form the most direct reference to Alma's three-day trial. In the soliloquy he expressed gratitude for those who had come to the Lord through his efforts in the

following words: "When I see many of my brethren truly penitent, and coming to the Lord their God, then is my soul filled with joy" (Alma 29:10). Significantly, the next lines form the direct link to Alma's experience with the powers of Jesus' Atonement: "Then do I remember what the Lord has done for me, yea, even that he hath heard my prayer" (Alma 29:10). In my view, we have the words of this very prayer in Alma's comments to Helaman. Alma says that during his three-day ordeal he recalled his father's prophecies about the coming of Jesus Christ. Afterwards, he says,

"I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.

"And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more" (Alma 36:18–19).

Because of that unforgettable moment when he received forgiveness of sins from God, Alma said fervently and gratefully, "I remember [God's] merciful arm which he extended towards me" (Alma 29:10).

The next two ties are less firm; however, they are worth mentioning. The first has to do with Alma's guilt. From his description of his reaction to his sins, it is clear that he did not see himself as a blameless person before God. For instance, he said that in his three-day experience, "I saw that I had rebelled against my God, and that I had not kept his holy commandments" (Alma 36:13). In discussing who is blameworthy before God and who is not, Alma gave the following in his dissertation, a clear characterization of his own situation when confronted by the angel of the Lord:

"He that knoweth good and evil, to him it is given according to his desires, whether he desireth good or evil, life or death, joy or remorse of conscience" (Alma 29:5). Alma had certainly experienced "remorse of conscience." He said:

"My soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sins.

"Yea, I did remember all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell" (Alma 36:12–13).

The second extra component deals with a hint of Alma's state during the three days that he was unable to respond physically but was fully conscious mentally. In the soliloquy in chapter 29 he spoke of his joy at the accomplishments of his friends, the sons of Mosiah, during their ministries among the Lamanites. And he hinted that the joy that he felt at such moments almost overcame him: "Now, when I think of the success of these my brethren my soul is carried away, even to the separation of it from the body, as it were, so great is my joy" (Alma 29:16). Perhaps Alma was thinking of his own ecstatic experience when he wrote these words.

THE TRIAL OF KORIHOR: ALMA 30

While we can read a substantial amount of what Alma said during the trial of Korihor (see Alma 30), because of the nature of the legal interchange we would normally expect to find nothing linked to Alma's three-day ordeal. But one matter reaches back to that experience: the idea that one soul perishes so that others may live.¹ To illustrate, when the angel of the Lord scolded Alma and his friends, the angel specifically said to Alma: "If thou wilt of thyself be destroyed, seek no more to destroy the church of God" (Alma 36:9). This thought led Alma not only to be "racked with eternal torment" because of all his "sins and iniquities" (Alma 36:12–13) but apparently to conclude that he "had murdered many of [God's] children, or rather led them away unto destruction" (Alma 36:14). In the case of Korihor, Alma tried to warn him simply to repent and not to seek a sign from God.

"I am grieved," said Alma to Korihor, "that ye will still resist the spirit of the truth, that thy soul may be destroyed.

"But behold, it is better that thy soul should be lost than that thou shouldst be the means of bringing many souls down to destruction" (Alma 30:46–47).

Clearly, Alma had once faced the possibility that his own life might have been taken to preserve others; and his own experience of coming face to face with this reality seems to underlie his appeal to Korihor not to "resist the spirit of the truth" (Alma 30:46).

SERMON TO ZORAMITES: ALMA 32–33

About 75 B.C., before the Zoramite people convinced the Lamanites to oppose Nephite interests—an act which led to war in the following year (see Alma 35:10–13)—Alma and his missionary companions had tried to preach to the Zoramites (see Alma 31:1–7). Even though Alma spoke frequently and to various groups in his missionary activity among these people, only one of his discourses to an audience of the poorer class is preserved (see Alma 32–33). In this address Alma touched on several points that link to his three-day experience. One of the most prominent of these points concerns his affirmation that God “imparteth his word by angels unto men, yea, not only men but women also” (Alma 32:23). Part of Alma’s testimony consisted of his knowledge that his missionary companion, Amulek, had been visited and taught by an angel (see Alma 10:7–10). The mention of women in Alma 32:23 seems important. Depending on who the subject is in Alma 10:11—it is either Alma or the angel—the angel may have also appeared to others of Amulek’s household, including “my women, and my children” (Alma 10:11). Alma had received many angelic visitations (see Alma 8:14); however, the first and most important visitation occurred when he and the sons of Mosiah were confronted by the angel of the Lord (see Mosiah 27:11; Alma 36:5–6). Thus he was a personal witness that angels were imparting the word of God to his fellow beings.

A second feature is Alma’s discussion of the virtues of humility, where he contrasts being compelled to be humble with the humility that some seek without compulsion. His audience, who were from the poorer classes of the Zoramite people and who had been cast out of their synagogues (see Alma 32:5), certainly invited such a comparison because of their circumstances. Nevertheless, in a real sense Alma had been compelled himself to become humble by the angel of the Lord. Thus, Alma spoke out of his own experience when he made the following observation:

“Because ye are compelled to be humble blessed are ye; for a man sometimes, if he is compelled to be humble, seeketh repentance. . . .

“And now . . . do ye not suppose that they are more blessed who truly humble themselves because of the word?

“Yea, he that truly humbleth himself, and repenteth of his sins, and endureth to the end, the same shall be blessed—yea, *much more blessed* than they who are compelled to be humble because of their exceeding poverty” (Alma 32:13–15; emphasis added).

Alma concluded his discussion by saying: “Blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble; . . . yea, without being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before they will believe” (Alma 32:16). While there may exist other reminiscences to Alma’s three-day experience in this discourse, they are more difficult to demonstrate. Two come to mind. The first has to do with Alma’s metaphorical use of the verb *taste* in the sense of tasting light (see Alma 32:35) and tasting joy (see Alma 36:24, 26). The second possible tie would link the concern for those who seek “a sign from heaven” (Alma 32:17) and the fact that Alma was given a clear heavenly sign in the person of the angel of the Lord who appeared to him.

COUNSEL TO HIS SONS: ALMA 38–42

In his counsel to his second son Shiblon, Alma spoke briefly and directly of his experience. After mentioning that during his ordeal he had been “born of God” (Alma 38:6), Alma related the following:

“The Lord in his great mercy sent his angel to declare unto me that I must stop the work of destruction among his people. . . .

“And it came to pass that I was three days and three nights in the most bitter pain and anguish of soul; and never, until I did cry out unto the Lord Jesus Christ for mercy, did I receive a remission of my sins. But behold, I did cry unto him and I did find peace to my soul” (Alma 38:7–8).

Another connection exists between Alma’s words to Shiblon and those to Helaman. It consists of the tie between Exodus terminology and that used in reference to the Atonement. As I have already noted, the verb *deliver* regularly describes the Lord’s actions on behalf of both the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and the Nephite peoples who found

themselves in grave circumstances. When he complimented his second son on his patience in the face of persecution, Alma affirmed: "Thou knowest that the Lord did deliver thee" (Alma 38:4). He then continued by saying, "Now my son, Shiblon, I would that ye should remember, that as much as ye shall put your trust in God even so much ye shall be delivered out of your trials, and your troubles, and your afflictions, and ye shall be lifted up at the last day" (Alma 38:5).

The clear connection between God's power to deliver and the Resurrection is not to be missed. In Alma's extended counsel to his third and youngest son, Corianton (see Alma 39–42), there are only a few references to Alma's three-day ordeal, such as, "Is it not as easy at this time for the Lord to send his angel to declare these glad tidings unto us as unto our children, or as after the time of his coming?" (Alma 39:19). Apparently, the appearance of the angel of the Lord to Alma was in the back of his mind when he discussed God's interest in informing His children in advance about the coming of the Messiah. A second point of contact is Alma's urgent plea that his children not lead others astray. He declared that the "Spirit of the Lord" had directed him to command his children "to do good, lest they lead away the hearts of many people to destruction" (Alma 39:12). Likewise, the angel of the Lord had earlier commanded Alma to "seek no more to destroy the church of God" (Alma 36:9), effectively accusing Alma of leading others astray and leading Alma to accuse himself in very serious terms: "I had murdered many of [God's] children, or rather led them away unto destruction" (Alma 36:14).

A third feature in Alma's instructions to Corianton is his description of the fearful condition of the wicked. In his review of the "state of the soul between death and the resurrection" (Alma 40:11), Alma said of the wicked:

"These shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth, and this because of their own iniquity. . . .

"Now this is the state of the souls of the wicked, yea, in darkness, and a state of awful, fearful looking for the fiery indignation of the wrath of God upon them" (Alma 40:13–14).

Alma further characterized this period as “that endless night of darkness” (Alma 41:7) and the inheritance of the wicked as “an awful death” that is tantamount to drinking “the dregs of a bitter cup” (Alma 40:26). An unrepentant Corianton’s evil acts, Alma certified, “will stand as a testimony against you at the last day” (Alma 39:8). Such words, of course, recall Alma’s own horror at the thought of seeing God at the judgment bar: “So great had been my iniquities, that the very thought of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror” (Alma 36:14).

SUMMARY

Virtually every one of Alma’s recorded sermons, whether it was a formal discourse or a spontaneous address, is characterized by the recollection of one or more features of his three-day conversion experience. The exceptions are his long prayer offered just before he and his companions began their work among the people of Zoram (see Alma 31:26–35) and his final words to his son Helaman which included his dire prophecy about the eventual extinction of their people (see Alma 45:2–14). Perhaps the element most frequently alluded to is the appearance of the angel of the Lord. Further, Alma frequently referred to the captivity and deliverance of earlier generations, whether the Israelite slaves or his Nephite forebears, the memory of which was specifically enjoined on him by the angel. An important connection, not made as often, concerned the association of Exodus-like deliverances with the power of deliverance manifested in Jesus’ atonement. In quite a different vein, Alma repeatedly mentioned the fate of the wicked in terrifying language and imagery that he similarly used to describe his own horror at facing God at the Final Judgment. In addition, almost as a counterbalance, he also regularly noted the unspeakable joy and light that believers would experience if they would accept Jesus’ redemption. A final ingredient is his testimony of what happened as a result of his determination and actions to bring others to accept Jesus’ atonement—to be “born of God,” to taste “as I have tasted,” and to see “eye to eye as I have seen” (Alma 36:26).

NOTE

1. The justification is first laid out in Nephi's dramatic encounter with the drunken Laban (see 1 Nephi 4:11–13). Compare Caiaphas' maxim about the need for Jesus' death (see John 11:50; 18:14) that bears the sense of political expediency. The underlying principle can be seen in 2 Samuel 20:20–22 and in Jonah 1:12–15. For similar Jewish formulations of the idea, see those cited by Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1924), 2:545–46. Most of these instances deal with political reasons for one to die instead of many. Legal and religious grounds are not spelled out.