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Nephi's Farewell

H. Dean Garrett

After a lifetime of service, Nephi, one of God's great prophets, bade farewell to his people and to all those who would read his writings. From his farewell statement we gain insights into his love and willingness to sacrifice for his people and into his personal relationship with the Lord. We learn why he kept records, how he felt about his writings, and what effect he thought they would have on those who would read them. Earlier in the Book of Mormon we saw Nephi as an energetic, dynamic, idealistic young leader, but in his farewell we see a seasoned, mature, disciplined prophet-leader, who had a deep sense of his mission.

Nephi, Record Keeper

A careful analysis of all the writings of Nephi shows that he wrote very little about his own ministry. The book of 1 Nephi is basically a record of his father's family. It deals with their interactions with each other and the struggles each one had in following the Lord. Early in 2 Nephi after recording Lehi's blessings of his descendants, Nephi notes that the family divided—those who followed Nephi were called Nephites and the others went with Laman and were called Lamanites. Nephi spent the rest of his life ministering the gospel to the Nephites.

The few short descriptions of what Nephi did as the leader of the Nephites tell us that he maintained the records, prepared military weapons for their defense, built a temple, and taught his people to be industrious (see 2 Nephi 5). The rest of his record contains a major address Jacob made to the Nephites, several chapters of the words of Isaiah copied from the brass plates, Nephi's prophetic commentary on those quotations from Isaiah, and a description of the latter-day time when his and other Nephite writings would come forth. This is the extent of Nephi's writings that are available to us. When the large plates of Nephi are made available, we assume they will have a fuller history of Nephi and his people.

Limitations of Nephi's Writings

One of the things we learn from Nephi's farewell is that he could not "write all the things which were taught among [his] people" (2 Nephi 33:1). Consequently, what we have might also be only a partial record of the doctrines they were taught. He had already told his readers, "If I do err, even did they err of old; not that I would excuse myself because of other men, but because of the weakness which is in me, according to the flesh, I would excuse myself" (1 Nephi 19:6).

Persuade Men to Come to God

Nephi's intention in writing was not to give a chronology of history or events. Rather, as he stated earlier, "mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and be saved" (1 Nephi 6:4). To do this he said he would not "write anything upon the plates save it be that I think it be sacred" (1 Nephi 19:6). He also said that "the Lord God [had] promised unto me that these things which I write shall be kept and preserved, and handed down unto

my seed, from generation to generation, that the promise may be fulfilled unto Joseph, that his seed should never perish as long as the earth should stand” (2 Nephi 25:21).

Persuade Men to Do Good

Nephi did not write to satisfy the intellect, although his words may do that. He wrote to communicate with the heart and the spirit of man, and persuaded his readers “to do good; [because his record] maketh known unto them of their fathers; and it speaketh of Jesus, and persuadeth them to believe in him, and to endure to the end, which is life eternal” (2 Nephi 33:4). Those who read Nephi’s writings need to decide their effect: whether they encourage them to accept Christ and live a Christ-like life, or rather encourage them to do evil and reject Christ. No reader can miss the Christ-centered emphasis of Nephi’s record. As George Q. Cannon concluded after having read the book for the first time, “An evil-minded man could not have written it, and a good man would not have tried to write it with intent to deceive” (Evans and Cannon 35).

Influence of the Holy Ghost

Nephi said he was not “mighty in writing, like unto speaking” (2 Nephi 33:1), but relied on the Spirit to make his words strong (v. 4). One of the reasons that he felt limited in writing was that he did not feel the same power of the Spirit when he wrote as he did when he spoke. He stated that “when a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 33:1). Nephi understood the power of the Holy Ghost from a unique perspective. He had had the experience of being carried to the top of a high mountain “in the Spirit of the Lord” (1 Nephi 11:1). In that special secluded environment, Nephi spoke with

the Holy Ghost “as a man speaketh; for I beheld that he was in the form of a man; yet nevertheless, I knew that it was the Spirit of the Lord; and he spake unto me as a man speaketh with another” (1 Nephi 11:11).

After discussing the character and attributes of the Holy Ghost, Elder James E. Talmage taught: “That the Spirit of the Lord is capable of manifesting Himself in the form and figure of man, is indicated by the wonderful interview between the Spirit and Nephi, in which He revealed Himself to the prophet, questioned him concerning his desires and belief, instructed him in the things of God, speaking face to face with the man” (159-60; see also Romney 90). As a result of this and many other personal experiences with the Spirit, Nephi was able to testify that “the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 33:1). This has literally been fulfilled in our times, as Brigham Young stated: “There is not a man or woman that loves the truth, who has heard the report of the Book of Mormon, but the Spirit of the Almighty has testified to him or her of its truth; neither has any man heard the name of Joseph Smith, but the Spirit has whispered to him—‘He is a true Prophet’” (*Journal of Discourses* 1:93; hereafter *JD*).

Plainness of His Words

As much as Nephi desired that all people would accept and apply the things that he taught, he knew that many would reject his writings. Although he gloried in plainness and in truth (2 Nephi 33:6), he understood that truth spoken plainly has a tendency to divide people, to be “quick and powerful, sharper than a two-edge sword, to the dividing asunder . . .” (D&C 11:2). Either people will accept, love, and live by the things he wrote or they will “harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit, that it [can have] no place in them; wherefore, they [will] cast many things away which are written and esteem them as things

of naught” (2 Nephi 33:2). It is critical that Nephi wrote in plainness. Elder Marvin J. Ashton, after quoting Nephi’s words, explained why plainness was necessary:

Plainness is best comprehended by the humble, the teachable, the intelligent, the wise, and the obedient. Often plain truths are perverted by the pretentious, the crude, the low, the critical, the contentious, the haughty, and the unrighteous. More so than in any other time in our history, there is an urgency in today’s society for men and women to step forward and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of plainness. God delights when His truths are taught clearly and understandably with no conspicuous ornamentation. Plainness in life, word, and conduct are eternal virtues. When the plainness of Christian teaching and living is lost, apostasy and suffering result (66).

Reaction to His Words

Because of his love for truth and because he knew that what he wrote was true, Nephi testified that his message “speaketh harshly against sin, according to the plainness of the truth; wherefore, no man will be angry at the words which I have written save he shall be of the spirit of the devil” (2 Nephi 33:5). Nephi learned by experience that whenever he taught his wayward brothers the truth they reacted violently against him. He understood that “the guilty taketh the truth to be hard, for it cutteth them to the very center” (1 Nephi 16:2).

Since the Book of Mormon came forth in 1830, by the power of God, Nephi’s prophecies of the world’s reaction to his words have been realized. This is evidenced by the great number of earnest, truth-seeking individuals who have prayerfully read the Book of Mormon and accepted it as truth. It is also evidenced by the numbers who have openly rejected it and bitterly fought against it. The Book of Mormon gives no allowance for sin. Neither is it written in a way that the reader can rationalize sin or faithlessness. There are no gray areas with the Book of Mormon. Either it is the word of God or it isn’t. Either it is true or it isn’t. Dr. Willard Richards understood this

concept very well. When he was introduced to the Book of Mormon and had read half a page, he exclaimed, "God or the Devil has had a hand in that book, for man never wrote it" (*History of the Church* 2:470 fn.).

Not only is it a divider of those who are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but also of those who are. Those members of the Church who reject it will fight against its doctrines and "harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit" (2 Nephi 33:2). It will divide father from mother, father from son, and mother from daughter. It will divide the righteous from the unrighteous. It was written in plainness for that purpose.

Nephi was concerned for those who would reject his writings, cautioning them that "Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness" (2 Nephi 33:11). Consistent with the other writers in the Book of Mormon, he invited the readers to judge for themselves the value of his writings. A latter-day prophet taught why this invitation could be given:

It is not just that the Book of Mormon teaches us truth, though it indeed does that. It is not just that the Book of Mormon bears testimony of Christ, though it indeed does that, too. But there is something more. There is a power in the book which will begin to flow into your lives the moment you begin a serious study of the book. You will find greater power to resist temptation. You will find the power to avoid deception. You will find the power to stay on the strait and narrow path. The scriptures are called the "words of life" (D&C 84:85), and nowhere is that more true than it is of the Book of Mormon. When you begin to hunger and thirst after those words, you will find life in greater and greater abundance (Benson, "The Book of Mormon" 7).

Satan's Interest in Nephi's Writings

Nephi understood and taught his people that the power of Satan is real (see 2 Nephi 28). He also knew that if his writings caused some to be angry, their reaction would show them to be

“of the spirit of the devil” (2 Nephi 33:5). The reason for this was stated by President Benson: “[The Book of Mormon] is a keystone in helping us avoid the deceptions of the evil one in these latter days. Satan rages in the hearts of men and has power over all of his dominions (see D&C 1:35). But the Book of Mormon has greater power—power to reveal false doctrine, power to help us overcome temptations, power to help us get closer to God than any other book” (“The Gift of Modern Revelation” 80). This might explain why there is such strong opposition toward the Book of Mormon. Satan cannot ignore this book. In fact President Benson warned that: “The adversary does not want scripture study to take place in our homes, and so he will create problems if he can” (“A Sacred Responsibility” 78).

The Book of Mormon attacks the very foundation of the Satanic kingdom. It represents true authority and manifests that the heavens are opened; and it is the “keystone” of God’s kingdom on earth. Elder Bruce R. McConkie has stated it this way:

The issue is not limited to a book; it embraces the great latter-day work of the Lord in all its parts. If the Book of Mormon is true, Joseph Smith was a prophet; if he was sent of God, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which he organized, is the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth; if this church, and this church only, is the Lord’s earthly kingdom, then all other churches are false. Hence, all who contend for some other way of life and salvation must, of necessity, oppose that which would destroy their system (461).

Satan has fought and always will fight against the work of God.

The Charity of Nephi

The many years of study, work, revelations, and personal righteousness developed in Nephi a deep and stirring love for the children of God. He described this love as charity, which has been defined as: “the highest, noblest, strongest kind of love,

not merely affection; the pure love of Christ. It is never used to denote alms or deeds or benevolence, although it may be a prompting motive" (*Bible Dictionary* 632).

Nephi expressed this charity for three different groups of people. He first expressed "charity for my people, and great faith in Christ that I shall meet many souls spotless at his judgment-seat" (2 Nephi 33:7). For the second group, the Jews, he simply stated: "I have charity for the Jew—I say Jew, because I mean them from whence I came" (2 Nephi 33:8). Nephi was himself a cultural Jew. Of the loins of Joseph, he grew up in the land of Jewish influence. He also had charity for the Gentiles, but his hope for them was qualified: "except they shall be reconciled unto Christ, and enter into the narrow gate, and walk in the strait path which leads to life, and continue in the path until the end of the day of probation," they have no promise (2 Nephi 33:9).

Promises of God

The different way Nephi viewed each of these groups can be understood by reviewing the promises he knew concerning each one. He had seen and knew that the seed of his father would become "a dark, and loathsome, and a filthy people, full of idleness and all manner of abominations" (1 Nephi 12:23), but that "they shall be remembered again among the house of Israel; they shall be grafted in, being a natural branch of the olive-tree, into the true olive-tree" (1 Nephi 15:16). This grafting was to be done by "the words of the righteous" which "shall be written, and the prayers of the faithful shall be heard, and all those who have dwindled in unbelief shall not be forgotten. For those who shall be destroyed shall speak unto them out of the ground, and their speech shall be low out of the dust, and their voice shall be as one that hath a familiar spirit" (2 Nephi 26:15-16). The Lord told Nephi that "I may remember the promises which I have made

unto thee, Nephi, and also unto thy father, that I would remember your seed; and that the words of your seed should proceed forth out of my mouth unto your seed” (2 Nephi 29:2).

Nephi also knew the promises to the Jews and the house of Israel: “It shall come to pass that the Jews which are scattered also shall begin to believe in Christ; and they shall begin to gather in upon the face of the land; and as many as shall believe in Christ shall also become a delightsome people” (2 Nephi 30:7). But God would not forget the promises made to Father Abraham; his seed would be saved.

The promises to the Gentiles were different. Nephi saw that when the writings of the Nephite prophets would be presented to the Gentiles, they would respond by saying, “We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible” (2 Nephi 29:3). Thus they would have to “be reconciled unto Christ” and repent of their attitudes and behavior and humbly accept the principles of the restored gospel and “enter into the narrow gate and walk in the strait path” in order for them to receive the promises made to the house of Israel. Yet Nephi understood that that opportunity would be made available for the Gentiles. The Lord told him that even though “the Gentiles are lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and have stumbled, because of the greatness of their stumbling block” (2 Nephi 26:20), yet the Lord would still offer them salvation because of their concern for his people. The Lord said: “I will afflict thy seed by the hand of the Gentiles; nevertheless, I will soften the hearts of the Gentiles, that they shall be like unto a father to them; wherefore, the Gentiles shall be blessed and numbered among the house of Israel” (2 Nephi 10:18). For them to be numbered among the house of Israel, they must enter into the covenant of the house of Israel which is initiated by baptism. That is, they will be required to accept the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus Nephi is able to testify that God has invited all unto him, “black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33).

There is one other equally important reason why Nephi had charity for these three groups of people—he was a man of charity and he had developed within his soul the “pure love of Christ” (Moroni 7:47). This allowed him to show this charity towards people, even those who would reject and fight against his words. This Christ-like love comes from a life centered in Christ and his Eternal Father. Earlier Nephi had cried, “why am I angry because of my enemy?” (2 Nephi 4:27), but later he had developed a spiritual, exalting love which allowed him to say “I pray continually for them by day, and mine eyes water my pillow by night, because of them; and I cry unto my God in faith and I know that he will hear my cry” (2 Nephi 33:3).

Nephi's Final Admonition

As Nephi wrote on the plates for the last time, his farewell message was not only of love and promise, but also of warning. His invitation was for “my beloved brethren, and also Jew, and all ye ends of the earth, [to] hearken unto these words and believe in Christ” (2 Nephi 33:10). He also knew that the Jews would write (29:7-14) and that their words would be combined with his to form a double witness of Christ.

Mormon, the major abridger of the Book of Mormon, also understood that the Bible and the Book of Mormon would be joined together. Centuries after Nephi had died, Mormon said the following in his own farewell address:

Therefore repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus, and lay hold upon the gospel of Christ, which shall be set before you, not only in this record but also in the record which shall come unto the Gentiles from the Jews, which record shall come from the Gentiles unto you. For behold, this [the Book of Mormon] is written for the intent that ye may believe that [the Bible]; and if you believe that [the Bible] ye will believe this [the Book of Mormon] also (Mormon 7:8-9).

The Lord testified in this dispensation that the Book of Mormon was intended to prove “to the world that the holy

scriptures are true . . .” (D&C 20:11). Both Nephi and Mormon emphasized that if a person believed in the Bible, he/she would accept and believe the Book of Mormon.

Brigham Young summarized this concept concisely as he taught:

No man can say that this book (laying his hand on the Bible) is true . . . and at the same time say, that the Book of Mormon is untrue. . . . There is not that person on the face of the earth who has had the privilege of learning the Gospel of Jesus Christ from these two books, that can say that one is true, and the other is false. No Latter-day Saint, no man or woman, can say the Book of Mormon is true, and at the same time say that the Bible is untrue. If one be true, both are (JD 1:38).

Nephi, therefore, warned those “that will not partake of the goodness of God, and *respect the words of the Jews, and also my words, and the words which shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the Lamb of God*, behold, I bid you an everlasting farewell, for these words shall condemn you at the last day” (2 Nephi 33:14; emphasis added). He had already reasoned why this warning was important: “If ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; and they teach all men that they should do good” (v. 10). The Book of Mormon teaches the major doctrines that are taught in the Old and New Testaments. Not only does it unify the Old and New Testaments, but it also restores the plain and precious truths that have been lost from those two sacred records. The Nephite record restores knowledge of the true role of the Savior and his mission. An example of this is the practice of blood sacrifice in the Old Testament. While the Old Testament tells what they did, it does not tell why they did it. It is the Book of Mormon that adds great insights into what that practice was intended for (see Alma 34). The teachings of the Apostle Paul take on additional clarity and power when examined in light of the Book of Mormon teachings. Paul’s teachings of the relationship of the Law of Moses with the sacrifice of Christ are greatly illuminated by the teachings of the

Book of Mormon. The Nephites understood the principles of rebirth, justification, sanctification and of being saved by grace.

Thus Nephi could write that his words “teach all men that they should do good” (2 Nephi 33:10). The reason his words teach men to do good is that they teach of Christ. Research has shown that Christ is mentioned in the Book of Mormon on an average of every 1.7 verses (Black 16). Its purpose is to teach that “Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God” (title page, Book of Mormon). Because of its strong witness for Christ, the Book of Mormon was designed, as Joseph F. Smith said about Mormonism, to make “. . . good men better men, and that it takes even bad men and makes good ones of them” (75).

With this understanding of the role of his writings, Nephi warned his future readers that “Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that [Nephi’s words] are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness” (2 Nephi 33:11). Not only did Nephi write with the authority of the Holy Ghost, but he also wrote as one having priesthood authority. He was commanded by God to write, and he obeyed (2 Nephi 33:15). He was a special witness. Understanding the role and position of what he had written, through priesthood power, Nephi sealed his writings with the promise that “what I seal on earth, shall be brought against you at the judgment bar” (2 Nephi 33:15).

Nephi was not writing to condemn his people, however. If his writings had the power to condemn, they also had the power to bless, to assist in saving people, and it was his prayer “that many of us, if not all, may be saved in his kingdom at that great and last day” (2 Nephi 33:12). President Spencer W. Kimball explained the desires of a prophet:

Prophets have a way of jarring the carnal mind. Too often the holy prophets are wrongly perceived as harsh and as anxious to make a record in order to say, “I told you so.” Those prophets I have known are the most loving of men. It is because of their love and integrity that they cannot modify the Lord’s message merely to make people

feel comfortable. They are too kind to be so cruel. I am so grateful that prophets do not crave popularity (“Listen to the Prophets” 77).

Nephi was that type of prophet. He understood what it meant to be saved in the kingdom of God. He had tasted of the white and delightsome fruit that his father had, and they both wanted their people to taste of that same fruit. Nephi had such a strong relationship with God that he was able to say: “I glory in my Jesus, for he hath redeemed my soul from hell” (2 Nephi 33:6). Apparently, he had had his calling and election made sure.

Conclusion

We learn a great deal about Nephi’s spiritual strength, his commitment to his Savior, his commitment to righteousness, and his love for truth and plainness from his farewell message. We learn that he had a great love for his people and loved to serve them. He also had great faith in the promises of God. He knew that though his people would fall, God would not forget them. Thus his service would not be in vain. When it came time for Nephi to die, “The people having loved Nephi exceedingly . . . were desirous to retain in remembrance his name” (Jacob 1:10-11). Thus, they called every king who served after him by the name of Nephi because he had lived such an exemplary life. His faith and righteousness are worthy of emulation. His knowledge and love for the truth are powerful. His life ended as all of our lives should end—in full harmony with his God. Of his passing, Jacob simply said: “And it came to pass that Nephi died” (Jacob 1:12). A modern witness of the influence of Nephi’s life comes from President Heber J. Grant:

I read the Book of Mormon as a young man, and fell in love with Nephi more than with any other character in profane or sacred history that I have ever read of, except the Savior of the world. No other individual has made such a strong impression upon me as did Nephi. He has been one of the guiding stars of my life (Durham 357).

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