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The Problem of Pride: A Book of Mormon Perspective

JARED M. HALVERSON

Doing some death-bed preparation for the upcoming seminary year, I set out to read the Old Testament in the few short weeks before school began. I had read it before, but I wanted to have it fresh in my mind before I tried to infuse it into the minds of my students, so I decided to fly through it one more time—cruising along at the rate of about a book a day. I don't think I read all fifty chapters of Genesis in one sitting, but I got close—closer still on Exodus's forty chapters, and by the time I reached Leviticus, with its paltry twenty-seven, I was just hitting my stride. After tearing through the Torah, I raced Joshua into the promised land and started sprinting past the Judges at breakneck speed. However, there I had to ease off my pace, at least for a moment—just long enough to catch my breath and scratch my head in disbelief at what I saw unfolding. Somewhere within the book of Judges, perhaps around Jephthah or Jair, I started feeling queasy watching the people of Israel spin around the pride cycle at dizzying speed. I had probably noticed the sequence before—wickedness, destruction, repentance, deliverance—but this time, perhaps because I was watching it uninterrupted round after round, I became almost physically, and definitely spiritually, sick! In frustration I wondered heavenward, "Why do You keep forgiving them when You know that they're just going to blow it? Why do You keep picking them up when You know that they'll fall again

on the very next page?" Quickly came the reply, far more quickly than answers usually come for me but still in the same small voice: "Because I do the same thing for you."

Oh. I get it. Thank heaven that God doesn't get as dizzy as we do. Indeed, thank heaven.

Perhaps the question I should have been asking was meant for Israel, not Israel's God: "Why do you keep falling down when you *know* the Lord has forgiven you so often in the past? Why don't you stay on your feet when God has just set you back on them?" In fact, these latter questions reveal the root of the problem and allow us to focus our frustration on those who truly deserve it—ourselves. Truly, the answer is easy for most Saints and scholars (unfortunately because the problem comes easily for us as well): pride. The pride cycle, so aptly named, moves its victims from deliverance and prosperity toward wickedness and destruction and ends only when pride comes to an end. It cannot end if pride is still present. Sadly, for many people the pride cycle continues forever in its downward spiral, ceaselessly spinning toward everlasting destruction.

Such is the story of the Book of Mormon. Of course pride is not the Book of Mormon's only story—the book is also a story of redemption, of scattering and gathering, of mighty missionaries and great changes of heart—but pride is one of its most prevalent and tragic themes. It is pride that brought the people of the Book of Mormon to their terrible end. As Mormon lamented to his son Moroni, "Behold, the pride of this nation . . . hath proven their destruction" (Moroni 8:27). Prophetically, these men knew that it might prove the destruction of our nation as well, for, in seeing our day, Moroni saw pride polluting the churches, "yea, even *every one*" (see Mormon 8:35–38; emphasis added here and in later references). Thus, the Book of Mormon becomes a "witness and a warning" to us of the dangers of this universal sin—a caution to stay far away from the threatening tide that has swept away entire nations before us.

In fact, there may be no more telling treatise on the problem of pride than the Book of Mormon.

It is certainly no coincidence that President Ezra Taft Benson, who wore out his life in proclaiming the Book of Mormon message, gave one of this dispensation's greatest sermons on pride. In one of his final general conference addresses, after having spoken almost exclusively of the Book of Mormon for the previous five years, President Benson gave his landmark address "Beware of Pride." It seems only fitting that after immersing himself, and the Church, in the study of the Book of Mormon, President Benson would offer—as if to summarize and finalize his emphasis on the book—the volume's nearly universal warning against the universal sin. In fact, President Benson drew that connection himself, completing the verse from which his title came: "Beware of pride, *lest ye become as the Nephites of old*" (D&C 38:39).

Simply stated, for the most complete and compelling look at the problem of pride, one need not look beyond the pages of the Book of Mormon. In dramatic detail it shows us the "awful consequences" of pride (Jacob 3:12), taking us on a tour, so to speak, of the pride cycle, explaining and illustrating its various landmarks: prosperity, pride, wickedness, destruction, and, hopefully humility, righteousness, and deliverance. It is a tour well worth taking, perhaps sparing the readers from having to experience the journey themselves.

PROSPERITY

The Book of Mormon's version of prosperity is multifaceted, but in each case it remains the launching pad of the pride cycle. Of course the riches, the fine silks and fine-twined linen, the flocks and herds, the gold and the silver (see Alma 4:6) are one form of pride-inducing prosperity, but they are not the only form. The Book of Mormon also speaks of a people's "boastings in their own *strength*"

(Helaman 4:13), be it military might, (see Mosiah 11:19; Mormon 3:9; 4:8), wisdom (see Alma 39:2), “chances for learning” (3 Nephi 6:12), or even supposed spirituality (see Alma 38:11–14).

Helaman, son of Helaman, witnessed perhaps the most subtle form of pride—“exceedingly great prosperity in the church” (Helaman 3:24)—which was manifested in its growth and activity, and the individual prosperity of its members. Unfortunately, the growth of the Church was paralleled by the growing pride of some of its members, and what had earlier been “a little pride” (Helman 3:1) grew into more pride (see v. 33), still more pride (see v. 34), and finally, “exceedingly great pride” (v. 36). In these verses, pride appears as a spreading infection, and indeed it was: it had “gotten into the hearts of the people” and was “grow[ing] upon them from day to day” (v. 36).

Helaman’s grandfather Alma the Younger had witnessed the same phenomenon concerning prosperity. In one year, 3,500 people entered the Church; unfortunately, conceit also entered its members (see Alma 4:5–6). Eventually this pride cankered and almost conquered the Church to the point that the pride of those within the Church exceeded the pride of those without. Thus, “the wickedness of the church [became] a great stumbling-block to those who did not belong to the church; and thus the church began to fail in its progress” (Alma 4:10). Today, members who pridefully tout the outward growth of the Church need to remember that those who boast that “Zion prospereth” are quoting Satan, not the Savior (2 Nephi 28:21).

In the Book of Mormon, the Lord promised prosperity to the obedient at almost every opportunity (see 1 Nephi 2:20; 4:14; 2 Nephi 1:9, 20, 31; 4:4; Omni 1:6; Mosiah 1:7; 2:22, 31; Alma 9:13; 36:1, 30; 37:13; 38:1; 48:25; 50:20). Obviously, prosperity is not wrong in and of itself any more than money (minus the love of it) is “the root of all evil” (1 Timothy 6:10). Strength is not sin, as long as

one recognizes its source; likewise, "to be learned is good *if they hearken unto the counsels of God*" (2 Nephi 9:29). In other words, although prosperity is not an inevitable path to pride, it often leads the natural man there.

PRIDE

Lamentably, this pull towards pride can result from even the purest forms of prosperity. Mormon described the generations that followed the coming of Christ as a period of "prosperity *in Christ*" (4 Nephi 1:23). Even so, he admitted only one verse later that "there began to be among them those who were lifted up in pride" (4 Nephi 1:24). In each of the above-mentioned cases, what began as prosperity quickly became pride as those so favored began to focus on the *state* of their blessings rather than on their *source*. Samuel the Lamanite recognized this subtle sin among the Nephites of his day and accused them of simultaneously "remember[ing their] riches" and forgetting the Lord their God. Their hearts were too set upon their prosperity and too swollen with "great pride" to ever be "drawn out unto the Lord" (Helaman 13:22; see also Helaman 6:17). As Nephi wondered aloud, "O, how could you have forgotten your God in the very day that he has delivered you?" (Helaman 7:20).

It seems that few things frustrated Mormon more than the connection between prosperity and pride. In fact, among the many "and thus we see" morals that Mormon included in his abridgment, what may be his longest insertion focused on the problem of pride. After seeing several rounds of the pride cycle play out in Helaman 11, Mormon sermonized for a full chapter before returning to the record itself. In the second verse he summarized the problem: "Yea, and we may see at the very time when he doth prosper his people, yea, in the increase of their fields, their flocks and their herds, and in gold, and in silver, and in all manner of precious things of every kind and art;

sparing their lives, and delivering them out of the hands of their enemies; softening the hearts of their enemies that they should not declare wars against them; yea, and in fine, doing all things for the welfare and happiness of his people; yea, then is the time that they do harden their hearts, and do forget the Lord their God, and do trample under their feet the Holy One—yea, and this because of their ease, and their exceedingly great prosperity” (Helaman 12:2).

As Mormon mentioned, “exceedingly great prosperity” may take many forms. Likewise, the pride that so often follows has many faces, most of which are shown in the pages of the Book of Mormon. As Father Lehi saw in his vision of the tree of life, pride is anything that lifts one up above the rest of the world, anything that leads one to mock and point the finger at those in pursuit of more spiritual things, anything that causes one to shrink away in shame after tasting the things of God (see 1 Nephi 8:26–28).

In President Benson’s definition of pride as “enmity,”³ he describes pride as anything anti-*God*. In this respect, the Book of Mormon’s anti-*Christ*s are additional illustrations of the disease of pride. Whether it be the knowledge and learning of Sherem (see Jacob 7), the strength and stature of Nehor (see Alma 1), or the skill and success of Korihor (see Alma 30), a prideful opposition to God and His servants was always at the core. And unfortunately, wickedness and destruction always lay in the future.

WICKEDNESS

Pride has been termed the universal sin because of the number of people it affects, but it may also be universal in the variety of sins that it breeds. Pride leaves the door to subsequent sin wide open. No wonder the next step in the cycle is wickedness, for pride is a catalyst for so many other evils. Worst of all, those who grow wicked because

of their pride will often grow proud of their wickedness; “lift[ing] up their heads” in their iniquity (Alma 30:18).

As previously mentioned, it was pride that characterized Nehor, and he passed this trait on to his followers (see Alma 1:6, 32). It was pride that King Mosiah feared most when he acknowledged his sons’ potential to return to their evil ways (see Mosiah 29:9). It was pride that lifted the Zoramites’ hearts as high as their Rameumptom, leading Alma to pray for the leveling of both (see Alma 31:25–27). It was pride that led the king-men to rebel against the government and seek to enthrone themselves (see Alma 51:17–21). And it was pride that King Noah sought in those he selected as his priests (see Mosiah 11:5), no doubt knowing that the prideful would not bow to the laws of God nor oppose those who chose to desecrate them. In each case, it was not the pride alone that alarmed the Lord but the “grosser crimes” that followed (see Jacob 2:22).

Because of the wickedness it engendered, pride was one of the chief causes of condemnation before the coming of Christ (see Helaman 13:22, 27). It was also one of Satan’s target temptations as that day approached (see 3 Nephi 6:10–15). Even after Christ came, the era of peace the people enjoyed ended abruptly because of pride. Ironically, the very people who had finally escaped the divisive “-ites” designation began to be distinguished and divided once again, this time by the costliness of their apparel and the quantity of their “fine things of the world” (4 Nephi 1:24). Once again, pride had opened the door to further wickedness and closed the door on a period of peace.

For one final example, pride figures prominently in a chapter that catalogs the strategies of Satan during the last days (see 2 Nephi 28). In one four-verse stretch, listing sins from false doctrine and persecution to whoredoms and abominations, pride appears in every verse—the one dark thread that binds every other sin together. Nephi saw that because of this pride and the sins that it generates,

many would go astray, pervert the Lord's right ways, and eventually "be thrust down to hell" (see 2 Nephi 28:12–15). Pride is indeed a damning sin. Perhaps this is so because pride essentially removes God from the picture; after all, pride could not possibly allow for a Being higher than itself. And with God either ignored or eliminated, there is only one master to serve and one direction to follow—toward misery and captivity (see 2 Nephi 2:27), or in pride-cycle terminology, destruction.

DESTRUCTION

Those referred to earlier who boasted in their own strength were "left in their own strength" (Helaman 4:13) and found it to be insufficient. Having declared their independence from God, those Nephites discovered their absolute dependence on Him, realizing that when people think they can do it on their own, God usually lets them try. For the first time, these Nephites recognized God as the source of their strength and knew that without the Spirit of the Lord to preserve them, they were "weak, like unto their brethren" (Helaman 4:24). Thus, the prideful Nephites were no different from the ignorant Lamanites, and both those who knew not God and those who would not know Him had the same "strength, even man for man" (Helaman 4:26). More precisely, they had the same weakness.

As Nephi learned, the pride that his father saw depicted as a "great and spacious building" fell, "and the fall thereof was exceedingly great" (1 Nephi 11:36). In fact, in a series of visions that used history to illustrate his father's dream, Nephi saw that because of pride his seed would fall as dramatically as did that building (see 1 Nephi 12:18–19), a prophecy that Mormon would see fulfilled to the letter (see Moroni 8:27). And lamentably, Nephi knew that his people were getting what they deserved. As he would later write, destruction is not just the *result* of pride, it is its *reward* (see 2 Nephi 26:10).

The destruction that comes of prideful wickedness need not be as dramatic as the annihilation of a nation. A smaller-scale slaughter among the Nephites had come similarly, “because of the pride of their hearts” (Helaman 4:12). Moreover, physical destruction is not the only outcome. Nephi saw the same in the spiritual realm, noting churches that “put down the power and miracles of God” and instead “preach up unto *themselves* their *own* wisdom and their *own* learning,” all in the hopes of getting gain (2 Nephi 26:20). These pride-filled churches “den[ied] the power of God” (Moroni 10:32), content to rely instead on their own power and preaching. Jacob prophesied the end of such man-made religion: “Wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish” (2 Nephi 9:28). Later Jacob described an even more personal form of spiritual destruction when he urged the Nephites, “let not this pride of your hearts destroy *your souls!*” (Jacob 2:16). The most intimate and immediate form of destruction is the loss of the Spirit, leaving those thus living “without God in the world” alone in a misery that refuses the company of God—now, as well as in the life to come (see Alma 41:11).

HUMILITY

Just as pride leads one away from God (the most devastating form of destruction), humility is a necessary prerequisite to “com[ing] unto Christ and be[ing] *perfected in him*” (Moroni 10:32). However, this step in the pride cycle is far from automatic. Just as prosperity does not inevitably lead to pride, nor does destruction inevitably lead to humility; direction is determined by decision. The same lengthy Nephite-Lamanite war had opposite effects on those who endured it—some turned to God while others turned away from Him. Those who allowed destruction to work its intended

course “did humble themselves before God, even in the depth of humility” (Alma 62:41), and could move forward toward deliverance.

Such was the understanding of Nephi, son of Helaman, who prayed for a famine “to stir [his people] up in remembrance of the Lord their God.” He hoped that “perhaps they [would] repent and turn unto [Him],” which they did, reminded by their afflictions “to remember the Lord their God” (Helaman 11:4, 7). Mormon shared similar desires but witnessed the opposite outcome. The suffering of his people did bring “lamentation . . . mourning and . . . sorrow before the Lord” but “not unto repentance, because of the goodness of God; but it was rather the sorrowing of the damned” (Mormon 2:12–13). For them, the pride cycle “bottomed out” at destruction.

Thankfully, however, patience usually has “her perfect work” (James 1:4), and people thus brought to their knees are eventually helped to their feet. As Alma joyously beheld among the Zoramite poor, “their afflictions had truly humbled them, and . . . they were in a preparation to hear the word” (Alma 32:6). Those who had hit rock bottom found that the only direction to look was up, and in so doing they finally found the God who had always been above them.

In fact, people move from destruction to deliverance and from pride to humility by following the simplest formula; “just add God.” When He is added, what may have formerly been labeled pride becomes something much more exalted. The best example of this truth is Ammon, who boasted of his God, in whose strength he could do all things. (see Alma 26:12). “If this is boasting,” Ammon mused, “even so will I boast” (Alma 26:36)—and so should we. Conversely, humility without adding God is not humility but rather a self-deprecating timidity that is as powerless to give God glory as pride is unwilling to do so.

What makes adding God so difficult is that it requires us to step out of the spotlight, something most people do not want to do. No wonder Alma used such a strong word in his soul-searching sermon

in Zarahemla. He asked, "Behold, are ye *stripped of pride*?" (Alma 5:28). Pride is usually not something we want to take off on our own; someone else has to strip us of that "fine-twined linen." To borrow Alma's later phrase, most of us "are necessarily brought to be humble" in a humiliating, destruction-type experience (Alma 32:12). Or as Nephi quoted from Isaiah, "the high ones of stature shall be hewn down; and the haughty shall be humbled" (2 Nephi 20:33). After all, the bent knee and bowed head that God requires (see Mosiah 27:31) is a difficult posture for the "stiff necks and high heads" of the prideful (Jacob 2:13).

Even then, those who are "compelled to be humble" only seek true repentance "sometimes" (Alma 32:13). Far more "blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble" (Alma 32:16), for they seek repentance at all times. And in seeking repentance, they find mercy, forgiveness, and a "joy which none receiveth save it be the truly penitent and humble seeker of happiness" (Alma 27:18).

RIGHTEOUSNESS

However it is done, pride must be stripped—and kept—off. It is one piece of costly apparel that will cost us everything if kept on. As Alma warned the people of Zarahemla, failing to put off pride would result in a failing grade on the test of life (see Alma 5:28). As if to prove his point, once Alma had offered this counsel, those who still failed to remove their pride were removed from the Church (see Alma 6:3). Regrettably, in our day the prideful are removing themselves from the Church, whether or not they actually leave it. As Nephi saw in prophetic vision, "because of pride," today's churchgoers "have all gone astray save it be a few, who are the humble followers of Christ" (2 Nephi 28:14).

Thus, continued righteousness and continual humility are the cure. Thankfully, each begets the other, and the pride cycle finally works in our favor as true humility engenders spiritual strength (see Ether 12:27). In stark contrast to the mounting pride around them, the faithful church members in Helaman's day "did wax stronger and stronger in their humility" and therefore "firmer and firmer in the faith of Christ . . . even to the purifying and the sanctification of their hearts . . . because of their yielding their hearts unto God" (Helaman 3:35).

King Benjamin's people shared a similar experience. Having finally seen themselves as "less than the dust of the earth," they covenanted to live even more righteously (see Mosiah 4:2–6), and their humility was rewarded with "a mighty change in [them], or in [their] hearts, that [they had] no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2).

DELIVERANCE

Once a people have humbled themselves before God and proven "their patience and their faith" (Mosiah 23:21), the Lord offers them His deliverance. In the case of Alma the Elder, the Lord eased the burdens of His people and eventually brought them out of bondage. In the process, the people learned that God does "visit [His] people *in their afflictions*" (Mosiah 24:14), and that He eventually delivers them *from their afflictions* (see Mosiah 24:16). We should learn the same—that God offers both proximate release and ultimate emancipation through what Nephi called "the great and eternal plan of deliverance" (2 Nephi 11:5).

For the Nephites, the Lamanites were not the only enemy, nor was earthly freedom the only reward. The people of Sidom checked their pride and humbled their hearts, "that they might be delivered from Satan, and from death, and from destruction" (Alma 15:17), all

of which is possible through God's "plan of deliverance." Even more significantly, the people of Gideon displayed the humility Alma had hoped for (see Alma 7:3, 6), and the Lord rewarded their righteousness with some of the most significant doctrine and powerful praise in all the Book of Mormon. For these faithful few, it was not the delivery from darkness, but the delivery of light that they longed for and received. So can it be for us. As King Mosiah remembered the people of Limhi, "[God] did deliver them because they did humble themselves before him . . . and thus doth the Lord work with his power *in all cases among the children of men, extending the arm of mercy towards them that put their trust in him*" (Mosiah 29:20).

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the senseless spinning shown in the Book of Mormon, the cycle of pride need not be unending. In reality, it will eventually stop, and each of us will find ourselves at one of two opposite ends—deliverance or destruction. Moreover, we may find that we have been heading in that particular direction for quite some time. There we will meet the embodiment of the trait we have acquired—for the humble, a condescending Christ; for the proud, our arrogant adversary.

It is fitting, therefore, that this testament of Jesus Christ is so persistent in its plea to be humble (see Mosiah 4:10–11; Alma 7:23; 13:13–14, 28; 34:19, 38; 37:33; Mormon 5:24) and so steady in its promise of prosperity. More importantly, it assures us that staying on this side of the cycle—the Lord's side—is possible. Two ideal examples form the bookends to the record of Alma. The first speaks of Saints who "in their prosperous circumstances . . . did *not* send away any who were naked, or that were hungry, or that were athirst, or that were sick, or that had not been nourished"; these were Saints who "did *not* set their hearts upon riches" but "were liberal to all" (Alma 1:30).

The other group was similar, for "notwithstanding their riches, or their strength, or their prosperity, they were not lifted up in the pride of their eyes; neither were they slow to remember the Lord their God; but they did humble themselves exceedingly before him" (Alma 62:49).

By keeping their "eye single to [God's] glory" (Mormon 8:15) rather than their own, these Saints remained remarkably steady in spite of the spinning cycle. We must do likewise, ignoring the siren song of arrogance and pride, focusing instead on the deliverance granted and the prosperity promised by the Lord. By so doing, we move forward through the mists of darkness, marching against the current of conceit until we reach the tree of life. There we may partake of the love of God, a fruit far sweeter than anything offered in the great and spacious building. There we may "fall down at the feet of Jesus" (3 Nephi 11:17), no longer bothered by the pointed pride of those within (see 1 Nephi 8:27). There the mocking cries of the wicked will be drowned out by the ceaseless singing of the choirs above (see Mormon 7:7). And there, at last, the humble will be able to leave the mortal pride cycle and join our meek Messiah in His "eternal round."

NOTES

1. See Ezra Taft Benson, "Beware of Pride," *Ensign*, May 1989, 4-7.
2. See Benson, "Beware of Pride," 4.