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Source: *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, The Doctrinal Foundation*

Editor(s): Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr.

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 1988

Page(s): 231-239

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## FROM SMALL MEANS THE LORD BRINGS ABOUT GREAT THINGS

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Clark V. Johnson

**T**he experiences of Lehi's family in the wilderness illustrate how God works with his children to bring them closer to him. They describe their experience as one of trials, discomfort, near starvation, rebellion, and death that occurred while they traveled from near the borders of the Red Sea to a place called Bountiful (1 Nephi 16:14). Daily crises were not reserved for Lehi's family but are common to us all. The experiences of Lehi's family illustrate that it is not position in life but reaction to daily adversity and prosperity that determines our eternal destiny. Through "small means" provided by God to meet our daily circumstances he brings about "great things"—our salvation as his children. Chapters 16 to 18 of 1 Nephi contain at least four keys that serve as guideposts to us as we try to build a successful relationship with our Father in Heaven and obtain salvation.

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## Obedience

Traveling in the desert for eight years, Lehi's group arrived at a place on the Indian Ocean which they named Bountiful (1 Nephi 16:13; 17:1, 5).<sup>1</sup> Even though their trials were great and should not be minimized, Nephi knew that the Lord had provided for them because they had kept the commandments (1 Nephi 17:3). He knew that "the commandments of God must be fulfilled," and that if "men keep the commandments of God he doth nourish them, and strengthen them" (1 Nephi 17:3). Nephi understood that he could accomplish all things, even to the point of changing the elements if the Lord required him to do so (1 Nephi 17:50). This is one of the keys: if the Lord requires it of you, you can do it!

Throughout 1 Nephi one cannot help but be impressed with Nephi's personal righteousness. After counseling with his brothers and giving them the interpretation of their father's dream of the tree of life, Nephi admonished his brothers to change their lives. He reasoned that "the kingdom of God is not filthy, and there cannot any unclean thing enter into the kingdom of God" (1 Nephi 15:34). When he had finished speaking to them, his brothers replied: "Thou hast declared unto us hard things, more than we are able to bear" (1 Nephi 16:1). Nephi agreed that he had spoken hard things against the wicked, but held out great hope for the righteous (1 Nephi 16:2–4). Laman and Lemuel, like many of us at times, had forgotten that the Lord gives us commandments to inspire us to righteousness, not to restrict us (D&C 20:7). It seems that before God helps his children they must approach him by striving to live in harmony with his commandments. Hence, Abinadi taught the rebellious Noah and his priests the Ten Commandments, which are the basis for establishing a relationship with God (Mosiah 12:31–37; 13:11–25). He further taught them of Noah that the wicked become angry when they hear the "truth," and that the word of God "cuts [the wicked] to [their] hearts" because of their sins (Mosiah 13:4, 7).

During the years prior to their arrival at the promised land, Laman and Lemuel and others in the group complained repeatedly about almost everything—departing into the wilderness, returning to Jerusalem after the brass plates, the broken bow, the death of Ishmael—and thought it ridiculous that the Lord would require them to help Nephi build a ship (1 Nephi 3:2–6; 4;

16:17–23, 31–32, 34–35; 17:17–22). It must also be remembered that during these trials they had had several faith-building experiences. Even though an angel had appeared to them, they had had revelatory help in finding food, and they were shocked by the power of God (which convinced them to help Nephi build the ship), they never experienced the growth that comes from obedience to principles (1 Nephi 7:16–20; 16:37–39; 17:45–55; 18:8–22).<sup>2</sup> The Lord demonstrated his power again and again, but they would not respond. They never acquired faith in the mission of their father (1 Nephi 17:20). They never learned that obedience is the key to obtaining salvation as taught in these chapters and revealed again through Joseph Smith. The prophet taught that,

There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven . . . upon which all blessings [or cursings] are predicated—and when we obtain any blessing [or cursing] from God, it is by obedience [or disobedience] to that law upon which it is predicated (D&C 130:20–21).

Nephi repeatedly tried both to warn and to teach his brothers and their families, and just when he felt that he might be successful, they always reverted to their old ways—complaining and plotting against him and their father until they had arrived at the point where they were “past feeling” (1 Nephi 17:45).

### The Use of the Scriptures

Sometime after the Lehi colony had arrived at the land Bountiful, Nephi was commanded to build a ship to make possible their journey to the promised land. His brothers laughed at and ridiculed him. They also began once again to plot against Nephi, threatening to take his life (1 Nephi 17:48).<sup>3</sup> They lamented that they were not still enjoying the comforts of Jerusalem (1 Nephi 17:21). Nephi spoke to them at great length trying again to persuade them to follow Lehi.

When Laman and Lemuel insisted that the people at Jerusalem were righteous and inferred that their father had deceived them, Nephi taught them out of the brass plates concerning the obedience of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (1 Nephi 17:40). He reminded them that even after God had delivered the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage, had destroyed the armies of Pharaoh by drowning them in the Red Sea, and had helped Israel

conquer the land of Canaan, they still turned against the Lord and rejected his prophets. He explained that when in the wilderness the children of Israel were bitten by fiery flying serpents and many people died, God prepared a way for them to be healed. All they had to do was to “look; and because of the simpleness of the way . . . there were many who perished” (1 Nephi 17:23–29, 41–42). Showing from scripture the history of the destruction of those who lacked the faith to believe, Nephi spoke prophetically of the coming destruction of the Southern Kingdom [Judah] by the Babylonians saying that “they are at this day about to be destroyed . . . and led away into captivity” (1 Nephi 17:43).<sup>4</sup> Nephi explained to them that God had led the righteous away from the wicked and testified that they would have been destroyed had they not followed their father (1 Nephi 17:38).<sup>5</sup> He taught them that God created the earth and man for a purpose, and that he blesses those who will have him to be their God (1 Nephi 17:36, 39–40, 45). He warned his brothers that the “righteous” are “favored of God” and that the reason Israel was led to Canaan anciently was the inhabitants of that land had become “ripe in iniquity” and God “did curse the land against them,” but he blessed the land for ancient Israel (1 Nephi 17:35).

Nephi instructed his brothers concerning the miraculous preservation of ancient Israel by the hand of the Lord, but they resented his teachings from the brass plates. It was only after a convincing demonstration of the power of God that they acknowledged his power and the righteousness of Nephi’s position (1 Nephi 17:48, 53–55). Nephi’s reference to God’s preservation of ancient Israel was analogous to God’s preservation of his father’s family (1 Nephi 17:23–24, 41–46).

While the teachings from the brass plates had a negative effect upon Laman and Lemuel, they had a positive effect upon other members of Lehi’s family. Lehi used the scriptures (brass plates) in a positive way to teach his son Joseph about his namesake, Joseph of Egypt. He spoke of the good qualities of Joseph who was sold into Egypt, and also related some of the prophecies of the ancient Joseph to his own son, noting that because he was a descendant of Joseph he would be blessed (2 Nephi 3).<sup>6</sup> It is clear that Nephi also believed that the teachings from the brass plates were applicable to them, for he wrote: “I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning” (1 Nephi 19:23). Perhaps this is one of the reasons that President

Spencer W. Kimball continually pled with us to study the scriptures. He wrote on one occasion:

Let us this year seek to read and understand and apply the principles and inspired counsel found within the [scriptures]. If we do so, we shall discover that our personal *acts* of righteousness will also bring *personal revelation or inspiration* when needed into our own lives.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the third key to obtaining salvation as illustrated by Nephi and Lehi is to study the scriptures.

Within the scriptures are lesson-filled stories about the ancients illustrating the principles that we need to acquire in order to come to know God and to receive personal revelation from him. A primary scripture for us today is the Book of Mormon. President Ezra Taft Benson has said:

The Book of Mormon was written for us today. . . . It is a record of a fallen people, compiled by inspired men for our blessing today. Those people never had the book—it was meant for us. Mormon, the ancient prophet after whom the book is named, abridged centuries of records. God, who knows the end from the beginning, told him what to include in his abridgment that we would need for our day.<sup>8</sup>

## Prophets and Prophet-Fathers

One of the great lessons in revelation and obedience is contained within the experience of Nephi's broken bow. When the small colony was unable to obtain food, many accused Nephi of being careless and they rebelled against God for getting them into such a predicament. Even father Lehi's faith faltered and he murmured against God (1 Nephi 16:18, 20).

Rather than murmur, Nephi made a wooden bow and some arrows, and then asked his father to inquire of the Lord where he should go to find meat (1 Nephi 16:23). Elder Marion D. Hanks said of this event:

"Whither shall I go to obtain food?" It is a simple thing, isn't it? . . . This means that Nephi went to his father and said, "Dad, the Lord has blessed you. You are his servant. I need to know where to go to get food. Dad, you ask him, will you?" Oh, he could have gone to his own knees. He could have taken over. I

count this one of the really significant lessons of life in the book. . . . A son who had strength enough, and humility enough, and manliness enough to go to his wavering superior and say, "You ask God, will you?" because somehow he knew this is how you make men strong, that wise confidence in men builds them. Lehi asked God and God told him, and Lehi's leadership was restored.<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes one fails to realize that Nephi was just as hungry as the rest, and in addition had been the object of their scorn. It would have been easy for him to have gone to the Lord himself, but he recognized the position of leadership held by his father, Lehi, and sought counsel from his prophet-father. What most of us fail to realize is that it is our reaction to daily crises which produce rebellion or righteousness.

When Lehi sought counsel from the Lord he not only learned where to send his son for meat but was also chastised by the Lord, which caused him to "fear and tremble exceedingly" (1 Nephi 16:27). None is exempt from the growing experience of being tried and chastened by the Lord. Father Lehi needed to be reprimanded by the Lord for his lack of faith. Unlike Laman and Lemuel, however, he repented. Joseph Smith attributed his own lack of revelation early in the Restoration to his foolishness and vain ambitions and was chastened by the Lord (Joseph Smith—History 1:28). Later in his life, the Lord chastised the Prophet for not teaching his family the commandments and included other members of the First Presidency as well (D&C 93:41–50). In a revelation to Brigham Young, the Lord taught that a person that will "not bear chastisement" is not worthy of his kingdom (D&C 136:31). Blessings received from a father or Church leader may include chastening from the Lord. The Lord gives instructions concerning what one must do on his own to help himself before he can expect help from the Lord. In evaluating their experience one notes that the Lord tells them exactly what to do to become worthy of further revelation. Many men and women when they receive chastenings in their blessings turn away, convinced that the Lord does not love them and will not help them. Thus they fall into the Laman and Lemuel trap and are not like Lehi, who accepted the rebuke and repented and continued to receive revelation from God.

From the life of Lehi we learn that revelation is a continuing process. Many assume that once they have received an answer to prayer that is sufficient and all that God requires of them. Nephi pointed out that after the people at Jerusalem had refused to

receive Lehi's words, after Lehi had obeyed the Lord's commandment to take his family and leave Jerusalem, after he had sent his sons back to Jerusalem to acquire the brass plates, after they had brought Ishmael's family into the wilderness, and after the children from the two families had intermarried, Lehi had fulfilled all the commandments the Lord had given him (1 Nephi 16:8).

But the Lord was not through with this father-prophet. After keeping all the commandments he had been given, Lehi received further revelation which commanded him to continue traveling in the wilderness. Thus we see that revelation is a steady, repeated process as God seeks to guide and direct our lives. This concept of continuous revelation was taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Happiness is the object and design of our existence; and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God. But we cannot keep all the commandments without first knowing them, and we cannot expect to know all, . . . unless we comply with . . . those we have already received.<sup>10</sup>

As Lehi's family made preparations to continue their journey, the Lord provided a new source of revelation, the Liahona (1 Nephi 16:10).<sup>11</sup> This remarkable instrument not only acted as a compass (1 Nephi 16:16), but also writing appeared upon it giving the group instructions. Nephi noted that the instrument worked only according to the obedience and faith of the group.

When Nephi sought directions from his father as to where he could find meat during a time of privation and starvation, Lehi consulted the Liahona. This instrument which Nephi calls a small means for the Lord to bring about great things, not only gave directions to Nephi, but also gave Lehi and other members of his family information that caused them to fear and tremble (1 Nephi 16:27–30). In the revelatory sense it was not unlike the seer stones possessed by a later Nephite prophet-king, Mosiah (Mosiah 8:13–18).<sup>12</sup> Receiving revelation is the duty of those who preside in the priesthood of the Church. For example, the prophet is to receive revelation for the whole Church, a stake president for the members within his stake, a bishop for the members of his ward and a father for the members of his family.

Near the end of his life Lehi responded to his revelatory responsibility to his children and gave each of his sons (and through them their families) a patriarchal (father's) blessing (2 Nephi 1–4). Thus, Lehi was a father-prophet who understood revelation and kept the commandments of God (1 Nephi 16:8). This is the fourth key for our obtaining revelation: follow the prophet, Church leaders, and honor our fathers.

## Conclusions

From the events in the lives of Lehi and his family come more than just experiences and difficulties in desert travel. Each crisis caused them to react. For the most part Lehi, Nephi, and others were faithful and grew from their experiences. They grew stronger physically, and they grew more sensitive spiritually. Their sensitivity caused them to appreciate the blessings that God had given them. Through personal obedience Nephi became a prophet. He sought the Lord in the temporal as well as the spiritual aspects of his life. The Lord responded to Nephi and directed him through continuous revelation so that he prospered in both areas.

Unlike their brother Nephi, Laman and Lemuel were too busy complaining to recognize the blessings of the Lord. Through disobedience they became "past feeling."

Nephi tried to teach his brothers from the scriptures. He used the stories of the ancient patriarchs and Moses to teach the principles of righteousness to his people. He taught them that even though the Lord had blessed Israel during the days of Moses, the Israelites rejected revelation and living prophets.

These chapters in the Book of Mormon illustrate for us the principles by which we must live if we are to live successfully in the Lord. Keeping the commandments, receiving personal revelation, and following living prophets give men and women happiness in this life and lead them to God, who rewards them with eternal life.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. *Bountiful* means plentiful. They named the place Bountiful "because of its much fruit" (1 Nephi 17:6).

2. See also 1 Nephi 3:29; 4:3.
3. Previously they had sought to kill their father Lehi as well (1 Nephi 17:44). Laman and Lemuel had developed the disposition to commit murder (1 Nephi 16:37–38).
4. In about 721 B.C. Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom, and Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians about 587 B.C. (LDS Bible Dictionary, pp. 638–39). The Lehi colony camped at Bountiful and built a ship about 591 B.C. (Book of Mormon, footnote p. 40.) After their arrival in the promised land Nephi declared to his people that Jerusalem had been destroyed. He had seen it in a vision. (2 Nephi 1:4.)
5. He pointed out that the people at Jerusalem had sought their father's life (1 Nephi 17:44).
6. See 2 Nephi 3:23, which points out that Joseph, Lehi's son, will be blessed because of the covenants Joseph of Egypt made with the Lord.
7. Spencer W. Kimball, "Always a Convert Church," *Ensign*, September 1975, p. 4.
8. Ezra Taft Benson, Conference Report, April 1975, p. 94. See also *Ensign*, May 1975, p. 63.
9. Marion D. Hanks, "Steps in Learning," Brigham Young University *Speeches of the Year*, 4 May 1960, p. 7.
10. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), pp. 255–56.
11. 1 Nephi 16:16, 27–30; see also Mosiah 1:16; Alma 37:38–40; D&C 17:1.
12. Mosiah II in addition to being a king of the people in Zarahemla was also a seer. He had the "interpreters" which allowed him to translate and see, giving him knowledge of the past, present, and future. (Mosiah 8:13, 17.)