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## The Human Personality

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# Lesson Department

## Theology and Testimony

(First Week in February)

*Select Readings:* Enos, Chapter 1; Mosiah, Chapters 1 to 5 inclusive.  
Note the teachings on whatever subject.

### THE HUMAN PERSONALITY

There is a singular thing in human nature: the far-away is usually more fascinating than the nearby. Astronomy was a science ages before the world ever heard of bacteriology. Distance nearly always, as the old saying has it, lends enchantment to the view.

Theology is no exception to the rule here. People became curious to know of God centuries before they wanted to learn anything about themselves. And so, all down the ages, theologians, whether pagan or Christian, debated about the existence of God, his character, and his relations, if any, with mankind. Man came in but incidentally.

Jesus, however, talked about man. His religion was what the lover of big words calls "anthropocentric." In a simple phrase, man is the center of the religion of Jesus. Not what is God's relationship to man, but rather what is man's relationship to God—that was Christ's way of putting the matter. And the difference is striking. So, as a matter of fact, there is little in the four *Gospels* about God, but a great deal about man. Christ took God for granted.

To talk overmuch about God and undermuch about man is to begin at the wrong end. The near-end is where we ought to begin the study of theology. That is where Jesus begins. And, singularly enough, that is where Joseph Smith begins, although, as we shall see presently,

it was not where the emphasis was placed by his religious contemporaries.

Christian theologians generally, in the time of the Prophet Joseph, talked about God. They sought to know what he was like, what his qualities were, whether he was a Person or an omnipresent Something. Also they talked about hell, as we have seen. They tried to imagine just what kinds of punishment God would mete out to unrepentant sinners there. Moreover, they talked about angels. In the Middle Ages the greatest Christian philosophers debated most earnestly the question, how many angels could stand at one time on the point of a needle—as if that had anything whatever to do with religion.

But Joseph Smith, in his first utterances on the subject of religion—which were in the *Book of Mormon*—wrote about man rather than about God. The Nephite Record begins at the near-end of religion, and is therefore, like ancient Christianity, anthropocentric. Nephite writers take God for granted. They do not attempt to draw fine-spun distinctions between theological tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum. Their concern is about man. They want to settle the question, how is he to be saved in the Kingdom of God?

Herein is one of the most striking things about the *Book of Mormon*—that, in an age of theological hair-splitting about abstractions not con-

nected directly with salvation, it should place the main emphasis on the study of man and how he was to be set on his feet spiritually. In this respect, the Record is almost a century ahead of its time, for only in recent years have leading Christians come to see that "the proper study of mankind (religiously) is man."

First of all, the Book of Mormon gives us a new definition of immortality.

In the *New Testament* there are statements which go to show that man's life did not begin with this earth. Jesus said he was before Abraham (John 8:58), and the Beloved apostle states that the Master was "in the beginning with God" (John 1:1, 2). And, since Jesus is our Elder Brother, there is the inference that we all "were in the beginning with the Father." There are other passages to the same effect. But the doctrine of a pre-earth life for man is not clear enough to lead, in the average Christian mind, to its being announced as a doctrine, or article of faith. Besides, Christian thinkers pretty generally, believing that man is a poor worm of the earth and lower than the angels, did not dare draw out the inference, because they felt it would be more or less blasphemous to do so. Therefore they recoiled from the idea.

An incident from the life of the poet Wordsworth will show that this is actually the case. In 1803 he published his "Intimations of Immortality," in which the following stanza occurs:

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come

From God, who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!  
Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
Upon the growing boy,  
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,  
He sees it in his joy;  
The youth, who daily farther from the east  
Must travel, still is Nature's priest,  
And by the vision splendid  
Is on his way attended;  
At length the man perceives it die away,  
And fade into the light of common day."

Afterwards, when people had read the poem and wondered at this particular passage, Wordsworth deemed it advisable to deny the plain meaning of the words. He said:

"Having in the poem regarded it as presumptive evidence of a prior state of existence, I think it right to protest against a conclusion, which has given pain to some good and pious persons, that I meant to inculcate such a belief. It is far too shadowy a notion to be recommended to faith, as more than an element in our instincts of immortality. But let us bear in mind that though the idea is not advanced in revelation there is nothing there to contradict it, and the fall of man presents an analogy in its favor."

This whole incident shows how utterly remote from the minds of Joseph Smith's contemporaries was any form of a pre-earth life for man.

But the *Book of Mormon* boldly advances such an idea. True, it is done almost incidentally, if we may say so. But it is done, just the same. As a matter of fact, that is the way in which we get many religious truths in the *Gospels*. The passage is to be found in Ether, chapter 3.

Moriancumr, the brother of Jared, has retired to a high mountain, for the purpose of inquiring of the Lord how the Jaredites are to have light in the ships in which they are to cross the sea. With him he has taken eight stones, which he pro-

poses to ask the Lord to touch. And this the Lord does. In the act of doing so, however, Moriancumr sees God's finger. Thereupon he requests that the Lord "show himself" to him in his whole Person. Then this conversation occurs:

"And the Lord said unto him: Believest thou the words which I shall speak?

"And he answered, Yea, Lord, I know that thou speakest the truth, for thou art a God of truth, and canst not lie.

"And when he had said these words, behold, the Lord showed himself unto him, and said: Because thou knowest these things, ye are redeemed from the fall; therefore I show myself unto you. Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. I am Jesus Christ. In me shall all mankind have light, and that eternally, even they who believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters.

"Never at any time have I showed myself unto man whom I have created, for never has man believed in me as thou hast. Seest thou that ye are created after mine own image? Yea, even all men were created in the beginning after mine own image.

"This body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; and man have I created after the body of my spirit; and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit, will I appear unto my people in the flesh."

The historian, Moroni, makes this comment on what he had just written: "Jesus showed himself unto this man in the spirit, even after the manner and in the likeness of the same body even as he showed himself unto the Nephites."

Two ideas stand out boldly in this remarkable passage. One is the *form* of our spiritual tabernacles; the other, the *fact* of our existence before this earth-life.

Nowhere else in sacred literature, so far as we are aware, is the form of the human spirit spoken of. It has often been supposed, by advanced Christian thinkers, that it is

in the same form as the fleshy body. The late Sir Conan Doyle believed so. But this, it appears, was the first time the doctrine was announced. In truth, however, revelation is the only source of any definite knowledge on the subject. For no man, "by searching," can find out the form of the human spirit, any more than he can learn anything about God. And this is an important thing to keep in mind.

As to the existence of the human spirit before its earthly life, only the fact is given here. If we wish to learn anything further on the point, we must go to other revelations to the Prophet Joseph.

One of these revelations (*Pearl of Great Price*) tells us something in addition to the fact of the spirit's existence. (1) The spirits of men are the children of God and the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, as spirits. This explains the phrase in the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father, which art in Heaven." (2) The "plan of life and salvation" was laid in the pre-earth life—proposed by our Savior. The plan involved (a) the making of an earth for the spirits to dwell upon, (b) the assumption of tabernacles of flesh and blood, and (c) the fall of man and the atonement of Christ. (3) Man in his mortal state was to be allowed his "free agency," for otherwise he could not be held accountable for his acts or be capable of any real moral growth.

These ideas, it must be born in mind, are not to be found in the *Book of Mormon* in this form, but are additions made by the modern prophet, through revelation.

It is interesting to note that the idea of a pre-earth life has been grasped by some of the world's great thinkers since Joseph Smith's time. Whether or not there is a

connection between their ideas and "Mormonism" does not, of course, appear. One of these is the Belgian philosopher Maeterlinck. Here is a passage from his book, *Our Eternity*.

"How shall we explain that, in that consciousness which ought to survive us, the infinity that precedes our birth has left no trace? Had we no consciousness in that infinity, or did we perchance lose it on coming into the world and did the catastrophe that produces the whole terror of death take place at the moment of our birth?"

"None can deny that this infinity has the same rights over us as that which follows our decease. We are as much the children of the first as of the second; and we must of necessity have a part in both.

"If you maintain that you will always exist you are bound to admit that you have always existed; we cannot imagine the one without having to imagine the other. If nothing ends, nothing begins, for any such beginning will be the end of something."

This passage is not quoted in confirmation of what the Prophet Joseph has said, whether in the *Book of Mormon* or elsewhere, for that would be presumptuous in view of the fact that the Prophet had these matters revealed to him; but it is quoted for the reason that the idea of a previous state of existence finds an appeal to the class of thinkers. For the idea, as we have already said, is growing on the modern mind that reflects at all. Besides, this fact throws into bolder relief the forehandedness of Joseph Smith in the doctrines he advanced in religion. This doctrine of a pre-earth life, together with the idea of a "plan" laid down in that state on the principle of human free agency, is one of the profoundest and most far-reaching religious conceptions ever revealed to man.

The Nephite Record, however, does more than reveal the fact of

our pre-earth life and in what form. It traces the life of the spirit through its various stages of progress.

First, there is, then, the spirit in its life before coming here to the fleshy body. Of the nature of that life in that "estate" we have said something already, and the reader who wishes to go into further details should consult the *Book of Moses* and the *Book of Abraham*, in the *Pearl of Great Price*.

Secondly, the spirit then enters upon its "second estate" on the earth. Just when the spirit enters into the fleshy body has never been revealed to us, so far as we know. There is an incident, however, in Third Nephi, chapter 1 (verses 11, 12, 13), where Jesus tells the prophet, "On the morrow come I into the world," in allusion to his birth in Palestine. And here, on the earth, the spirit lives in its body of flesh and blood for a season. Then he "dies," as we say. His body is buried in the ground. But what becomes of the spirit? Alma the Younger answers this question.

Thirdly, the "spirits of all men, whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life." Let us quote the entire passage, which is very illuminating:

"Now, concerning the state of the soul between death and the resurrection—behold, it has been made known unto me by an angel, that the spirits of all men, as soon as they are departed from this mortal body, yea, the spirits of all men, whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life.

"And then it shall come to pass that the spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of happiness, which is called Paradise—a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care and sorrow. The spirits of the wicked, who are of the devil—for they have no part nor portion of the Spirit of the Lord; for they chose evil works rather than good; therefore the spirit of the

devil did enter into them, and take possession of their house—these shall be cast 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, in darkness, and a state of awful, fearful looking, for the fiery indignation of the wrath of God upon them; thus they remain in this state, as well as the righteous in Paradise, until the time of their resurrection.” (Alma 40:11-14.)

Fourthly, is the re-embodied state of the spirit. Alma, in some verses following the above quotation, is equally clear on this phase of life also. He says:

“There is a first resurrection, a resurrection of all those who have been, or who are, or who shall be, down to the resurrection of Christ from the dead. We do not suppose that this first resurrection can be the resurrection of the souls and their consignment to happiness or misery. Nay; but it meaneth the reuniting of the soul with the body, of those from the days of Adam down to the resurrection of Christ.

“Whether the souls and the bodies of those of whom has been spoken shall all be reunited at once, the wicked as well as the righteous, I do not say; let it suffice, that I say that they all come forth; or in other words, their resurrection cometh to pass before the resurrection of those who die after the resurrection of Christ.

“There is a space between death and the resurrection of the body, and a state of the soul in happiness or in misery until the time which is appointed of God that the dead shall come forth, and be reunited, both soul and body, and be brought to stand before God and be judged according to their works. The soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul. Every limb and

joint shall be restored to its body. Even a hair of the head shall not be lost, but all things shall be restored to their proper and perfect frame.

“Then shall the righteous shine forth in the kingdom of God. But behold, an awful death cometh upon the wicked; for they die as to things pertaining to righteousness; for they are unclean, and no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of God.”

### Questions

1. Why have men always been interested most in the things that are farthest away? Name some things remote to our daily lives that have given way to things that are of closer concern. What are some things that receive the greater emphasis nowadays?

2. What significance has the “recantation” of the poet Wordsworth as to the idea of a pre-earth life in his time? Just what idea is taught in the passage quoted from his “Ode”? How clear is this idea? Why are poets often compared with prophets?

3. State clearly the two ideas that stand out in the passage quoted from Ether. Compare them with that in the poet Wordsworth for clearness. Just what bearing have these two ideas on human conduct today—if any? That is, what difference does it make whether they are true or not?

4. Give the substance of what Alma says about the state between death and the resurrection, about the resurrection and after. Find some additional thoughts on the subject.

## To the Youth of America

There is no agency in the world today that is so seriously affecting the health, efficiency, education, and character of boys and girls as the cigarette habit.—*Herbert Hoover.*

Boys, through cigarettes, train with bad company. The cigarette drags them down.—*Henry Ford, famous manufacturer.*

Tobacco used in any form destroys a boy's ability to apply himself to study and prevents his comprehending or remembering his lessons.—*Homer H. Seerley, beloved educator.*