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Lessons from the Zarahemla Churches

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Dennis L. Largey

In the October 1986 general conference, President Ezra Taft Benson said:

We must make the Book of Mormon a center focus of our study [because] it was written for our day. The Nephites never had the book; neither did the Lamanites of ancient times. It was meant for us. . . . Under the inspiration of God, who sees all things from the beginning, [Mormon] abridged centuries of records, choosing the stories, speeches, and events that would be most helpful to us. . . .

If they [the Book of Mormon writers] saw our day and chose those things which would be of greatest worth to us, is not that how we should study the Book of Mormon? We should constantly ask ourselves, “Why did the Lord inspire Mormon (or Moroni or Alma) to include that in his record? What lesson can I learn from that to help me live in this day and age?” (“The Book of Mormon” 6)

Why did the Lord inspire Mormon to include Mosiah 25–27 for our day? These chapters inform us of the state of the Church in Zarahemla from about 120 to 92 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. Mosiah 25 records the reaction of the people of Zarahemla as they listened to the accounts of Zeniff and his people “from the time they left the land of Zarahemla until they returned again” (Mosiah 25:5) and that of Alma and his people and the afflictions they suffered. Chapter 25 also recounts Alma’s labors in establishing the Church in Zarahemla. Mosiah 26 describes the difficulties encountered by the Church

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because of the unbelief of the rising generation, as well as Alma's struggle to handle the transgression of Church members properly. Chapter 27 tells the story of the conversion of Alma the Younger and the four sons of king Mosiah and the beginning of their labors for the Church.

What, then, can members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints learn from the "stories, speeches, and events" which comprise this portion of Nephite history? I believe that an examination of the operation of the churches in Zarahemla, as well as events associated with the Church, offers at least three invaluable lessons for our day. First, the doctrines contained in Mosiah 25–27 provide a standard of truth to a darkened latter-day world. Second, these chapters show how the Nephites dealt with four challenges that face the Church in our own day: the challenges of flattery, teaching the rising generation, persecution, and transgression in the Church. And third, the example of the rebirth of Alma the Younger and the four sons of Mosiah is a message of hope to those troubled by sins in our own day.

Mosiah 25–27: A Standard of Truth

Nephi prophesied that the Book of Mormon would come forth in a day when churches would be "built up, [but] not unto the Lord" (2 Nephi 28:3). He also saw that latter-day churches would "contend one with another," each proclaiming to be the Lord's church, and that they would "teach with their learning, and deny the Holy Ghost" (2 Nephi 28:3, 4).

Belief in the Book of Mormon as a divine record settles many issues that have been debated for centuries in the Christian world. The Book of Mormon confounds false churches and the precepts of humankind. A standard of judgment is thus established, and by comparing other churches with this standard, error can be discerned and eliminated.

For example, just within Mosiah 25–27 are the following doctrinal truths: (1) Jesus is the head of the Church (Mosiah

26:22); (2) Jesus directs his Church through revelation to his prophet (Mosiah 26:13–32); (3) baptism must be by total immersion (Mosiah 18:14; 25:18); (4) Church members who sin must be admonished by the Church (Mosiah 26:6); (5) the Church may have many congregations, yet there is only one Church—all branches teach the same doctrine as directed by the living prophet (Mosiah 25:21–22); and (6) baptism is necessary to take upon oneself the name of Jesus Christ and to enter into his Church (Mosiah 25:18, 23). The functioning of the Church in Zarahemla is a reflection of the operation of the true Church of Jesus Christ in any age. By having this blueprint, readers are strengthened in their belief that “God is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Mormon 9:9).

Some Christians have criticized members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for being church-centered instead of Christ-centered in worship. Perhaps this belief comes from repeated testimonies of members that the *Church* is true, attempting to bear witness of the truth of the Restoration. Chapters 25–27 of Mosiah reveal the true relationship between Christ and his Church. One must come to Christ through faith and repentance of all sin, and then receive the ordinances of salvation provided by the Church (Mosiah 25:15–18).

Four Challenges to the Church

Perhaps another reason why the Lord included Mosiah 25–27 is that the Lord knew it would benefit us to study how the Nephite church handled challenges that we face in our day. At the point in Nephite history discussed in Mosiah 25–27, members fell prey to the deception of flattery; parents had the challenge of effectively teaching the rising generation; many suffered persecution; and priesthood leaders had to learn how to handle transgression in the Church.

The Challenge of Flattery

Many members of the Church in Zarahemla became victims of sin by believing the flattering words of unbelievers. Mormon wrote, “They did deceive many with their flattering words, who were in the church, and did cause them to commit many sins” (Mosiah 26:6). One of the prominent unbelievers of this period was Alma the Younger:

He being called Alma, after his father; nevertheless, he became a very wicked and an idolatrous man. And he was a man of many words, and did speak much flattery to the people; therefore he led many of the people to do after the manner of his iniquities. (Mosiah 27:8)

Flattery, as it is used in the Book of Mormon, is associated with deception, vanity, idolatry, false prophecy, apostasy, bringing souls to destruction, and persuasive speech attributed to the power of the devil. Flattery is portrayed not as a coercive measure but as a deceptive skill that enables one to lead others in a desired direction (see Mosiah 27:8; Alma 46:5). Alma’s motive in using flattery was to lead others to do “after the manner of his iniquities” (Mosiah 27:8). False shepherds can also carry the message, “Come follow me.” Their success in gaining followers becomes an investment in their own deception, as in the case of Korihor (see Alma 30:53).

President Joseph F. Smith foresaw that flattery would be one of three temptations that the latter-day Church would face: “There are at least three dangers that threaten the Church within, and the authorities need to awaken to the fact that the people should be warned unceasingly against them. As I see these, they are flattery of prominent men in the world, false educational ideas, and sexual impurity” (312–13).

It is imperative that we be careful about whom we allow to influence us. There are prominent hirelings in many fields who do not care for the Lord’s sheep or for his teachings. President Benson, reflecting upon the words of President Smith, said:

Seeking the applause of the world, we like to be honored by the men whom the world honors. But therein lies real danger, for oftentimes, in order to receive those honors, we must join forces with and follow those same devilish influences and policies that brought some of those men to positions of prominence.

More and more the honors of this world are being promoted by the wicked for the wicked. We see this in publicity and awards that are given in movies, literature, art, journalism, etc. (*God, Family, Country* 235)

Jesus warned, “Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets” (Luke 6:26). President Heber J. Grant was known to have said many times: “When certain men start to praise me or applaud me or speak well of me, I say to myself: ‘Heber Grant, you must not be doing your duty or such men would not praise you’” (Lee 14).

Flattery appeals to pride, vain ambition, and excessive appetite for approval, acceptance, or praise. Apostatizing for power or position in the world is tantamount to exchanging one’s birthright for the temporary satisfaction of a mess of pottage. Jesus cautioned, “If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you” (John 15:19). As that is true, perhaps people can gauge their closeness to the kingdom by their distance from the world.

The Challenge of Teaching the Rising Generation

Many of the rising Nephite generation rejected the faith of their fathers. They refused baptism, would not pray, and chose to remain “in their carnal and sinful state” (Mosiah 26:4). Mormon wrote, “And now because of their unbelief they could not understand the word of God; and their hearts were hardened” (Mosiah 26:3). Together, unbelief and sin create a barrier, or shield, which prevents people from feeling the spiritual influence that enlightens the mind. Nephi told his brothers:

Ye are swift to do iniquity but slow to remember the Lord your God. Ye have seen an angel, and he spake unto you; yea, ye have heard his voice from time to time; and he hath spoken unto you in a still small voice, but ye were past feeling, that ye could not feel his words. (1 Nephi 17:45)

Unbelief and sin are inversely related to the first principles of the gospel: faith in Jesus Christ removes unbelief, and repentance removes sin. Unimpaired by these handicaps, a person can then begin to understand and obey the word of God. Mormon noted that in this same time period “there was nothing preached in all the churches except it were repentance and faith in God” (Mosiah 25:22). The preaching of these two prerequisites to baptism served anciently as an antidote to the problems of unbelief and sin. Parents of the rising generation today are likewise under strict command to teach these first principles to their children (D&C 68:25).

The Challenge of Persecution

During this time of unbelief, persecution against the Church in Zarahemla became so great that king Mosiah sent out a proclamation forbidding the persecution of Church members (Mosiah 27:1–2). In an epistle to Timothy, the Apostle Paul wrote, “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim 3:12). This truth spans dispensations and continents and will be true of members of the Church of Jesus Christ until the millennial day. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “The enemies of this people will never get weary of their persecution against the Church, until they are overcome” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 259). Although elements of our modern society may have altered the form of the attack, the challenges are still basically the same. Perhaps the day of mass martyrdom is over, but Lucifer’s goal has never been exclusively the death of the body. A live body, dead to Christ, is more important to him than a martyr awaiting celestial glory. Jesus cautioned his disciples: “Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.

But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him” (Luke 12:4–5). The Church today faces a sophisticated and in some cases organized force of unbelievers who have at their disposal the communication technology to spread their war of words against the Saints.

In a First Presidency message entitled “Keep the Faith,” Elder Gordon B. Hinckley wrote:

There is another group presently receiving wide publicity across the nation. They are poking into all the crevices of our history, ferreting out little things of small import and magnifying them into great issues of public discussion, working the media in an effort to give credibility to their efforts.

None of this is new, of course. From the day that Joseph Smith walked out of the grove in the year 1820, critics and enemies—generation after generation of them—have worked and reworked the same old materials. . . . Early in this fishing expedition, one of them gathered affidavits from neighbors and associates in an effort to undermine the character of Joseph Smith. This old bale of straw has been dished up again and again as if it were something new. They have raked over every available word that he spoke or wrote, and they then in turn have written long tomes and delivered long lectures trying to explain the mystery of his character and his work. (4)

The story of the efforts of Alma the Younger and the four sons of Mosiah to destroy the Church sends a message to those who would pursue a similar course today. The Lord’s words in the preface to the Doctrine and Covenants are applicable:

What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or the voice of my servants, it is the same. (D&C 1:38)

The message to modern-day persecutors is the same as it has always been, whether the warning voice comes personally from the mouth of an angel, or vicariously through the voice of scripture: “Go thy way, and seek to destroy the church no more, . . . and this even if thou wilt of thyself be cast off” (Mosiah 27:16).

The Challenge of Handling Transgression in the Church

Alma anguished in spirit because as chief high priest he had to sit in judgment over those who had sinned in the church. What he learned is significant to Latter-day Saints. Alma's tribulation and the revelation that followed are a guide for modern priesthood leaders who, by virtue of their callings, must make similar decisions.

Mormon recorded, "It became expedient that those who committed sin, that were in the church, should be admonished by the church" (Mosiah 26:6). The Church as a light to the world cannot be allowed to dim through tolerance of sin. Neither the Lord nor his Church can "look upon sin with the least degree of allowance" (Alma 45:16). The Lord told Alma the conditions that would qualify one to be found on the right hand of God following judgment:

For it is I that taketh upon me the sins of the world; for it is I that hath created them; and it is I that granteth unto *him that believeth unto the end* a place at my right hand. For behold, in my name are they called; and *if they know me* they shall come forth, and shall have a place eternally at my right hand. And it shall come to pass that when the second trump shall sound then shall they that never knew me come forth and shall stand before me. . . . And then I will confess unto them that I never knew them; and they shall depart into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (Mosiah 26:23–25, 27; emphasis added)

Ironically, at the judgment day those who chose not to know Jesus during their mortal lives will receive from him the pronouncement "I never knew you" (3 Nephi 14:23; compare Mosiah 26:25–27). This judgment includes those who refuse to enter into a covenant relationship with the Lord, as did the rising generation in Alma's day, and those who break their covenants and refuse to repent. Sheep who know and reject the true shepherd in order to graze in other pastures will not be numbered or known in the fold, but will lose their inheritance. King Benjamin taught:

I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives. And it shall come to pass that whosoever doeth this shall be found at the right hand of God, for he shall know the name by which he is called; for he shall be called by the name of Christ. And now it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall not take upon him the name of Christ must be called by some other name; therefore, he findeth himself on the left hand of God. (Mosiah 5:8–10)

The Lord then taught Alma that the same criteria for the separation of the wicked from the righteous at the judgment day should be applied within the Church, with the stipulation that one could change course through confession of sin and sincere repentance:

Therefore I say unto you, that he that will not hear my voice, the same shall ye not receive into my church, for him I will not receive at the last day. Therefore I say unto you, Go; and whosoever transgresseth against me, him shall ye judge according to the sins which he has committed; and if he confess his sins before thee and me, and repenteth in the sincerity of his heart, him shall ye forgive, and I will forgive him also. . . . Now I say unto you, Go; and whosoever will not repent of his sins the same shall not be numbered among my people; and this shall be observed from this time forward. (Mosiah 26:28–29, 32)

The Lord's words "if he confess his sins before *thee* and *me*" are instructive for individuals seeking to repent. It is necessary to confess certain sins to bishops as well as to the Lord.

This story also reveals an important pattern concerning revelation in the Church. First, the unbelievers were leading people to sin, and it became necessary for Alma to deal with the transgressors (Mosiah 26:9, 10). Second, the prophet inquired of the Lord for a solution, and the Lord responded by revealing his will to Alma concerning those who had transgressed (Mosiah 26:13–32). Finally, the prophet recorded the Lord's word, and the revelation then became a standard in the Church for judgment (Mosiah 26:33). Many of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants were received in much the same manner.

The Rebirth of Alma the Younger and the Four Sons of Mosiah

The transition from the world to the kingdom of God was a painful process for Alma and the four sons of king Mosiah. Alma's testimony confirms this: "After wading through much tribulation, repenting nigh unto death, the Lord in mercy hath seen fit to snatch me out of an everlasting burning, and I am born of God" (Mosiah 27:28).

Despite the pain involved, the conversion stories in Mosiah chapter 27 send a message of hope to those today who have deeply sinned and desire to repent. The scriptures describe Alma the Younger as a wicked and an idolatrous man (Mosiah 27:8) and the sons of Mosiah as "the very vilest of sinners" (Mosiah 28:4). Church members today who despair because they perceive their sinful past as a barrier to positive growth or opportunities to serve in the Church can receive assurance from the experience of Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah that the repentant can become great in the sight of God.

One precept discussed in the text of Mosiah 27 is that the prayers of faithful parents can help bring about the repentance of their rebellious children. The angel told Alma the Younger, "For this purpose have I come to convince thee of the power and authority of God, that the prayers of his servants might be answered according to their faith" (Mosiah 27:14). Parents today often pray with great faith for their rebellious sons and daughters, yet they do not always receive the same results. Alma the Elder's gospel is the same gospel that we have today; why then are there not more angels and more thunderous and transforming experiences? Mortal parents who make their own best efforts to reach their children can invoke divine assistance through prayer, for all scriptures unite in testifying that God answers prayers. Perhaps the Lord *does* send angels, but angels of a different sort. Inspired teachers, friends, bishops, home teachers, scout leaders, and others can serve the same function

as angels from above. These embodied angels, inspired by the Holy Ghost, are sent by the Lord to assist and to love.

Evidently there were factors in Alma the Younger's circumstance that necessitated his peculiar experience. President Wilford Woodruff taught: "The Lord never did nor ever will send an angel to anyone merely to gratify the desire of the individual to see an angel. If the Lord sends an angel to anyone, He sends him to perform a work that cannot be performed only by the administration of an angel" (Ludlow 191).

Although Alma's transformation was initiated by an angel, Alma still needed to exercise his agency and choose for himself. Later verses about his life reveal steps that all who achieve conversion must follow. In a sermon to the people of Zarahemla, Alma the Younger said:

Behold, I testify unto you that I do know that these things whereof I have spoken are true. And how do ye suppose that I know of their surety? Behold, I say unto you they are made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God. Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself. And now I do know of myself that they are true; for the Lord God hath made them manifest unto me by his Holy Spirit. (Alma 5:45-46)

Alma revealed even more details about his experience to his son Helaman. His emphasis to Helaman was not upon his experience with the angel, but upon his deliverance through Christ from the pain and bitterness of sin (see Alma 36:16-20). Alma's story, together with other conversion stories in the Book of Mormon, teaches the process one can follow to come to know the Savior. One of the great truths revealed in Alma's conversion story pertains to the doctrine of rebirth. Alma recounted that after he had repented "nigh unto death" (Mosiah 27:28) he was born of God. Concerning his experience with the Lord he said:

And the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; And thus they become new creatures; and unless

they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God. (Mosiah 27:25–26)

Alma’s experience exemplifies this change from the carnal to the spiritual. Recognition gives way to remorse and then to forgiveness and a mighty change of heart. Spiritual rebirth then leads to the desire to preach the gospel so others might receive this same joy.

Conclusion

In making his abridgment of the sacred records of the Nephites, Lamanites, and Jaredites, Mormon wrote, “I cannot write the hundredth part of the things of my people” (WofM 1:5). So, as President Benson has reminded us, Mormon chose to record “the stories, speeches, and events that would be most helpful to us” (“The Book of Mormon” 6).

Mosiah 25–27 has special relevance for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It testifies of Christ and restores plain and precious truths about the true gospel and church of Christ. It counsels us on how to handle the challenges that we face in our own day, including flattery, teaching the rising generation, persecution, and transgression in the Church. It also teaches us, through the story of the conversion of Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah, that although repentance can be painful, even those who have sinned deeply can become tools in the Lord’s hands to bless others’ lives, if they will repent of their sins.

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