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Likening the Scriptures unto Us

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Likening the Scriptures unto Us

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Elder Dean L. Larsen

I have been advised that this fireside concludes a series of activities that have focused attention on the Book of Mormon, with particular emphasis on the book of Alma. In many ways Alma could qualify as an independent scripture. It is by far the largest book in the Book of Mormon, with almost twice as many chapters as 2 Nephi, the second largest book. Its recounting of the missionary labors of the sons of Mosiah among the Lamanites is one of the most remarkable missionary stories of all time. Alma's great treatise on faith and the power of God's word in chapter 32 is a classic. Amulek's explanation of the Atonement in chapter 34 is as straightforward and clear as any treatment of this subject to be found in the scriptures. Alma's admonitions to his son Corianton merit the closest study, particularly his exposition on mercy, justice, and judgment in chapter 42. And there is so much more.

As I have studied the Book of Mormon, I have become convinced that, in addition to its being another powerful witness for Jesus Christ and his gospel plan, it has unusual value for us by virtue of what we can learn from the experiences of the people whose record it is. In some respects, our review of the historical events in the book permits us to see a reflection of ourselves. As we compare circumstances and conditions in our own time with those we see in relevant segments of the Book of Mormon history, we may be able to predict with some degree

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of accuracy the consequences of human behavior in our day. We can also gain vital insight into how we may continue to merit the Lord's blessings and thus avoid the calamities that so often befell these ancient people. The book of Alma is as useful in this kind of review as any of the scriptures we possess. With your indulgence, I am going to look beyond the significant doctrinal teachings that make Alma such a rich treasury and invite you to look with me at the lives of the people from this part of the record and compare them with conditions and events in our present day. In doing so, I intend to draw upon other relevant sources, some from the Book of Mormon, and some from other documents that may help us to see ourselves in the continuing historic panorama of God's dealings with his earthly children.

"And Thus They Did Dwindle in Unbelief"

As the book of Mosiah concludes, the people of Nephi have been established under a government of elected judges. Alma, the son of Alma, has been named as the "first and chief judge." He is also the presiding officer of the Church.

It is a good time. The great love felt by the people for King Mosiah has laid a strong foundation for the new government. The Church is well established, and the people rejoice "because of the liberty which had been granted unto them" (Mosiah 29:39).

Challenges soon confront the leaders in this new system. Alma is faced with a seditious movement against the government as well as against the Church. Gideon, one of the most loved and respected of the senior citizens, is murdered. Nehor, who has instigated the insurrection, and who is personally guilty of Gideon's murder, is summarily tried and executed for his crime. But his apostate influence has taken root among the people, for, as the record says, "there were many who loved the vain things of the world," and "the hearts of many were hardened" (Alma 1:16, 24).

By the time five years have passed, the Nephite nation is torn by civil war, and there are many defections from the Church. In the midst of these difficulties, the Nephites are invaded by Lamanite armies. In the ensuing battles, so many Nephites are slain that they are “not numbered, because of the greatness of their number” (Alma 3:1). It is a time of great remorse among the Nephites.

And so great were their afflictions that every soul had cause to mourn; and they believed that it was the judgments of God sent upon them because of their wickedness and their abominations; therefore they were awakened to a remembrance of their duty. And they began to establish the church more fully; yea, and many were baptized in the waters of Sidon and were joined to the church of God. (Alma 4:3-4)

In this resurgence of faith the Nephites prosper again. Peace returns. Remarkably, it does not last for long. Within a period of three years, defection and apostasy begin to manifest themselves within the Church.

And it came to pass in the eighth year of the reign of the judges, that the people of the church began to wax proud, because of their exceeding riches, and their fine silks, and their fine-twined linen, and because of their many flocks and herds, and their gold and their silver, and all manner of precious things, which they had obtained by their industry; and in all these things were they lifted up in the pride of their eyes. (Alma 4:6)

The dissension spreads rapidly. Alma, perplexed by the drift of his people toward another tragedy, resigns from his position as chief judge and turns his full energy and attention to the collapsing Church.

And this he did that he himself might go forth among his people, or among the people of Nephi, that he might preach the word of God unto them, to stir them up in remembrance of their duty, and that he might pull down, by the word of God, all the pride and craftiness and all the contentions which were among his people, seeing no way that he might reclaim them save it were in bearing down in pure testimony against them. (Alma 4:19)

Alma then goes to the major cities of the land to accomplish his purpose—to Zarahemla, Gideon, Melek, Ammonihah, Sidom, among the Zoramites, and eventually to Jershon. Much of Alma's record is composed of the great doctrinal discourses preached by Alma and his companions in their efforts to reclaim this people. It is a labor of many years and demands the utmost of Alma's faith and perseverance.

In the course of these events, we can observe the manner in which the Lord tests and tries his people. We note, as well, the afflictions that he permits them to bring upon themselves in order to humble them and keep them from falling completely away from the course he has marked out for them. The warfare and suffering described in the latter chapters of Alma are grim reminders of the tragedies that people can bring upon themselves when they drift away from the Lord's standard.

In each dispensation of the gospel prior to the one in which we live, there has come a time when the people of God have succumbed to the worldly influences that have encompassed them. Periods of spiritual darkness have followed as the earth's inhabitants have turned themselves away from God and have suffered the consequences of their folly. The saddest recorded accounts in the scriptural and historical records are those of once-favored people who drift into apostasy.

Following the Savior's visit to the Nephites and Lamanites here in the Americas, the people who responded to his ministry enjoyed a period of unprecedented prosperity and happiness. In 4 Nephi we find this description of them:

And the Lord did prosper them exceedingly in the land; yea, in-somuch that they did build cities again where there had been cities burned. . . . And . . . the people of Nephi did wax strong, and did multiply exceedingly fast, and became an exceedingly fair and delightful people. . . . And it came to pass that there was no contention among all the people, in all the land; . . . And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God. (4 Nephi 1:7, 10, 13, 16)

For almost 200 years the people lived in these favored circumstances. Then, almost inconceivably, they left the pattern of life that had brought them such great blessings.

Mormon's commentary on the spiritual decline of this people is worthy of careful, thoughtful review:

And now I, Mormon, would that ye should know that the people had multiplied, insomuch that they were spread upon all the face of the land, and that they had become exceedingly rich, because of their prosperity in Christ. And now, . . . there began to be among them those who were lifted up in pride. . . . And from that time forth they did have their goods and their substance no more common among them. And they began to be divided into classes. . . . And . . . there were many . . . which professed to know the Christ, and yet they did deny the more parts of his gospel. . . . The people did harden their hearts, for they were led . . . to do all manner of iniquity. . . . And thus they did dwindle in unbelief and wickedness, from year to year. (4 Nephi 1:23–27, 34)

But wickedness did prevail upon the face of the whole land, insomuch that the Lord did take away his beloved disciples, and the work of miracles and of healing did cease because of the iniquity of the people. And there were no gifts from the Lord, and the Holy Ghost did not come upon any, because of their wickedness and unbelief. . . . For behold they had wilfully rebelled against their God. (Mormon 1:13–14, 16)

Similar Challenges in Our Time

We have been assured that in this last dispensation of the fulness of times, there will be no universal apostasy. When the Lord appears again in his glory, he will find a people who will have remained faithful and who will be ready to receive him and join with him in the completion of his work.

But the fact that there will not be a complete apostasy in this last dispensation does not mean all who have received the gospel and become members of the Church will remain faithful. Prophetic references to our own day, in fact, seem to indicate that there will be many who have known the truth and have tasted of the Lord's goodness that will then allow themselves to be tempted away from the course the Lord has marked out for them.

In the October general conference of 1965, Elder Harold B. Lee spoke of the test that would come, and in his remarks he cited the words of President Heber C. Kimball, who said:

We think we are secure here in the chambers of the everlasting hills, . . . but I want to say to you, . . . the time is coming when we will be mixed up in these now peaceful valleys to that extent that it will be difficult to tell the face of a Saint from the face of an enemy to the people of God. Then, brethren, look out for the great sieve, for there will be a great sifting time, and many will fall; for I say unto you there is a test, a TEST, a TEST coming, and who will be able to stand? (Whitney 446; qtd in Lee 1152)

In Lehi's vision of the tree of life, he describes those who would be tempted away from the path of eternal happiness, even after they have followed the rod of iron to the tree and tasted of its fruit. This is Lehi's description of what he saw:

And it came to pass that there arose a mist of darkness; yea, even an exceedingly great mist of darkness, insomuch that they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost.

And it came to pass that I beheld others pressing forward, and they came forth and caught hold of the end of the rod of iron; and they did press forward through the mist of darkness, clinging to the rod of iron, even until they did come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree.

And after they had partaken of the fruit of the tree they did cast their eyes about as if they were ashamed.

And I also cast my eyes round about, and beheld, on the other side of the river of water, a great and spacious building; and it stood as it were in the air, high above the earth.

And it was filled with people, both old and young, both male and female; and their manner of dress was exceedingly fine; and they were in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who had come at and were partaking of the fruit.

And after they had tasted of the fruit they were ashamed, because of those who were scoffing at them; and they fell away into forbidden paths and were lost. (1 Nephi 8:23–28)

Nephi later declared, "And it came to pass that I saw and bear record, that the great and spacious building was the pride of the world" (1 Nephi 11:36).

In reference to the calamities that will come upon the disobedient in the last days, the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith:

Nevertheless, Zion shall escape if she observe to do all things whatsoever I have commanded her.

But if she observe not to do whatsoever I have commanded her, I will visit her according to all her works, with sore affliction, with pestilence, with plague, with sword, with vengeance, with devouring fire. (D&C 97:25–26)

Behold, vengeance cometh speedily upon the inhabitants of the earth, a day of wrath, a day of burning, a day of desolation, of weeping, of mourning, and of lamentation; and as a whirlwind it shall come upon all the face of the earth, saith the Lord.

And upon my house shall it begin, and from my house shall it go forth, saith the Lord;

First among those among you, saith the Lord, who have professed to know my name and have not known me, and have blasphemed against me in the midst of my house, saith the Lord. (D&C 112:24–26)

Behold, I tell you these things, even as I also told the people of the destruction of Jerusalem; and my word shall be verified at this time as it hath hitherto been verified. (D&C 5:20)

With these direful warnings and predictions the Lord combines remarkable promises to those who will remain faithful and who will not yield to the temptations the world offers. But these are conditional promises. The Lord will not be mocked in these last days by those who make covenants of obedience and then violate them with a sense of impunity or with the deceitful intent of one day repenting and coming back into line after purposeful excursions into forbidden paths.

Nephi was allowed to see our time in vision, and he knew of the efforts the adversary would make to delude and confuse the members of the Church as well as others of God's children. Nephi said:

For behold, at that day shall he rage in the hearts of the children of men, and stir them up to anger against that which is good. And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell. (2 Nephi 28:20–21)

We live in a time of rapid Church growth. Large numbers are being baptized throughout the world. Many countries that have not been accessible to the missionary effort are now

opening their doors. In many respects Zion is prospering, and things seem to be going well.

In the midst of this apparent general prosperity of the Church, it is well for us to look carefully and honestly into our own lives to see if some of the evidences of spiritual infirmity are beginning to reappear, particularly in light of the warnings the Lord has given to us.

Maintaining Centers of Spiritual Strength

Historically, the drifting away from the course of life marked out by the Lord has occurred as individuals begin to make compromises with the Lord's standard. This is particularly true when the transgression is willful and no repentance occurs. Remember Mormon's description of those who turned away from the true path in his day. They did not sin in ignorance. They willfully rebelled against God. It did not occur as a universal movement. It began as individual members of the Church knowingly began to make compromises with the Lord's standard. They sought justification for their diversions in the knowledge that others were compromising as well. Those who willfully sin soon seek to establish a standard of their own with which they can feel more comfortable and which justifies their misconduct. They also seek the association of those who are willing to drift with them along this path of self-delusion.

As the number of drifting individuals increases, their influence becomes more powerful. It might be described as the "great and spacious building syndrome." The drifting is the more dangerous when its adherents continue to overtly identify with and participate with the group that conforms to the Lord's way. Values and standards that were once clear become clouded and uncertain. The norm of behavior begins to reflect this beclouding of true principles. Conduct that would once have caused revulsion and alarm now becomes somewhat commonplace.

Alma was faced with this challenge as he began his efforts to reestablish the order of the Church among his people. To them he said:

All you that are desirous to follow the voice of the good shepherd, come ye out from the wicked, and be ye separate, and touch not their unclean things; and behold, their names shall be blotted out, that the names of the wicked shall not be numbered among the names of the righteous. . . . For what shepherd is there among you having many sheep doth not watch over them, that the wolves enter not and devour his flock? And behold, if a wolf enter his flock doth he not drive him out? Yea, and at the last, if he can, he will destroy him. And now I say unto you that the good shepherd doth call after you; . . . and he commandeth you that ye suffer no ravenous wolf to enter among you, that ye may not be destroyed. (Alma 5:57, 59–60)

Alma's father, you will recall, had been faced with this problem in the days of King Mosiah. He consulted with the king, and it was determined that the matter should be dealt with within the Church. Alma, therefore, went to the Lord to learn what should be done. The Lord's response is of great significance.

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 26:29, 32)

Zeezrom's story in the book of Alma is an excellent example of the effectiveness of repentance. Zeezrom, who once taunted and defied Alma, made a dramatic change in his life and became one of the stalwarts in the effort to strengthen the Church and reconvert his people. He was one of the few who became companions with Alma in his missionary labors, obviously deserving of the complete trust and confidence of his priesthood leader.

The safe course to follow is to adhere strictly to the standards set by the Lord, without compromise. Those who do so give support to one another in righteousness and faith. They

have compassion for the sinner, but an intolerance for sin. They deal with the unrepentant sinner in such a way that that person cannot persist in working any evil, insidious influence among them.

Such was the case with the people of Enoch. Time will not permit a review of the circumstances in Enoch's day, but a careful study of that episode may give some insight into the manner in which the Lord will preserve a righteous people in our time in a world that is ripening in iniquity as it was before the flood.

Within the framework of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Savior has provided a refuge from the evils of the world. Wherever a congregation or community of Saints is found, there should be the sustaining influence of the gospel and the assurance that those who identify themselves as Saints are applying themselves to gospel principles.

As in the days of Enoch, the Lord makes promises to the faithful of this dispensation who will maintain such centers of spiritual strength.

And the glory of the Lord shall be there, and the terror of the Lord also shall be there, insomuch that the wicked will not come unto it, and it shall be called Zion. And it shall come to pass among the wicked, that every man that will not take his sword against his neighbor must needs flee unto Zion for safety. And there shall be gathered unto it out of every nation under heaven. (D&C 45:67-69)

And the nations of the earth shall honor her, and shall say: Surely Zion . . . cannot fall, neither be moved out of her place, for God is there, and the hand of the Lord is there; And he hath sworn by the power of his might to be her salvation and her high tower. Therefore, verily, thus saith the Lord, let Zion rejoice, for this is Zion—THE PURE IN HEART. (D&C 97:19-21)

In conforming to the instruction given by the Lord to Alma, leaders have an obligation to exercise the judicial processes essential to preserving a refining gospel environment, free from the corrupting influences that otherwise intrude within the group and threaten its spiritual base.

In establishing the code of honor here at Brigham Young University, Church leaders have attempted to foster an institu-

tion of higher learning that can offer those who come here as faculty or students the assurance of a place where academic studies can be pursued in a gospel environment uncontaminated by the influences that are destructive to faith and spiritual well-being.

All who enroll here at BYU make a pledge to which they affix their signatures as an affidavit that they will abide by the code of honor or be subject to dismissal.

You will know, individually, whether you have integrity to that pledge. I think you will have some sense, collectively, as to whether this code of honor is being upheld by the student body of BYU. May I give it as my strong personal conviction that to the degree you, individually, violate this code, you invite into this campus community a spirit of dissent that will inevitably have its effect upon you as well as upon this institution.

May I express profound admiration and gratitude to those of you who retain your commitment to this code of honor as well as to the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Your integrity will not go unnoticed by a just and loving Father in Heaven. You represent a moral strength that is greatly needed today. You continue to contribute to the perpetuation of a condition here on this campus that will bless many lives.

It should not surprise us, in light of the counsel we have been given, that we occasionally observe some of the things Alma saw among the members of the Church for whom he had concern and to whom he made this appeal:

Behold, I say unto you, that the good shepherd doth call you; yea, and in his own name he doth call you, which is the name of Christ; and if ye will not hearken unto the voice of the good shepherd, to the name by which ye are called, behold, ye are not the sheep of the good shepherd. And now if ye are not the sheep of the good shepherd, of what fold are ye? . . . For I say unto you that whatsoever is good cometh from God, and whatsoever is evil cometh from the devil. . . . And now, my brethren, I would that ye should hear me, for I speak in the energy of my soul; for behold, I have spoken unto you plainly that ye cannot err. (Alma 5:38–40, 43)

At the conclusion of his record in the Book of Mormon, Enos speaks of the struggle that was necessary to keep the

people of his day from falling into disobedience and despair. He says:

And there was nothing save it was exceeding harshness, preaching and prophesying of wars, and contentions, and destructions, and continually reminding them of death, and the duration of eternity, and the judgments and the power of God, and all these things—stirring them up continually to keep them in the fear of the Lord. I say there was nothing short of these things, and exceedingly great plainness of speech, would keep them from going down speedily to destruction. (Enos 1:23)

I do not believe conditions among the members of the Church today are as severe as they were in Enos' time. However, I believe it is a time for great plainness in speech. Against the backdrop of conditions in Alma's day and the prophecies the Lord has given pertaining to our own time, I have tried to speak to you in plainness and forthrightness about the conditions in which we live and the reasons for feeling some concern about whether we are fully qualifying for the blessings the Lord has promised. I have hoped to confirm two things with you that the Lord has made clear in his revelations. One is that, while the Lord has made it clear that he will not permit apostate influences to engulf his Church in this dispensation, he may, from time to time, require a purging of those who fail to withstand the tests, in a manner that he has described in unmistakable terms. Such purging, if it is required in our day, will be as painful and devastating as any experienced by God's children at anytime on the earth. The suffering of the disobedient in the time of Alma gives us some idea today of the terrible circumstances that a wayward people can bring upon themselves.

The second thing I wish to confirm with you is that if we will be faithful to the gospel plan of life, if we will keep the commandments of God without compromise, without attempting to willfully, purposefully cheat against that which we know to be right and pure and good, we will have the preserving, protecting power of the Lord to be with us, regardless of the course the world may take and its inevitable consequences.

We have a solemn obligation to the Lord, to ourselves, to our posterity, and to the many good people in the world who are looking for the right way to preserve a community of Saints whom the Lord can bless and who can serve as a beacon and a sanctuary to all who love the Lord and seek to do his will. May we be wise enough and honest enough with ourselves to learn from the scriptural examples preserved for us and avoid the tempting of the adversary, who desires to cheat our souls and lead us carefully down to his depths of despair and misery. May we be fervent enough in our faith and love of the Lord and his work that we will be more than passive camp followers in our Church membership. May we be assertive and aggressive in standing for all that is right and pure and good, I pray humbly in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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