



Type: Magazine Article

Characters and Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Lesson 14—Nephi

Author(s): Leland H. Monson

Source: *Relief Society Magazine*, Vol. 39, No. 12 (December 1952),
pp. 843–847

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Abstract: The objective of this lesson is to gain an appreciation of the character and teachings of Nephi, and to realize the value to all men in emulating them.



Theology—Characters and Teachings of The Book of Mormon

Lesson 14—Nephi

Elder Leland H. Monson

(Text: The Book of Mormon, 1 and 2 Nephi)

For Tuesday, March 3, 1953

Objective: To gain an appreciation of the character and teachings of Nephi, and to realize the value to all men in emulating them.

“I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them As the Lord liveth, and as we live, we will not go down unto our father in the wilderness until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord hath commanded us” (1 Nephi 3:7, 15). In this firm and decisive manner, Nephi spoke concerning the assignment he and his older brothers had been given to bring the brass plates from the house of Laban in Jerusalem to the tent of Lehi in the valley of Lemuel.

After one vain attempt by Laman to secure the brass plates, the older brothers, with flagging resolution, were ready to renounce their undertaking and to return to the tent of their father. Such a spiritless attitude was foreign to the character of Nephi. With inspired determination, he buoyed up their spirits to the point where they were able to accomplish their mission.

That they might fail in this as-

signment given them of the Lord was unthinkable to Nephi. He knew that they could accomplish the assigned task with the Lord's help. It is this faith in God, this determination to carry out his commandments, which dominate the character of Nephi throughout a long and illustrious life. Recognizing these qualities as basic in Nephi, we can easily understand why former President Heber J. Grant could say that Nephi exerted a more powerful influence on his life than any character in sacred or profane history, save only Jesus Christ.

Nephi was young when he made this hazardous journey to Jerusalem to secure these brass plates, but the characteristics which were to dominate his life were already formed. He grew to young manhood and received his early training in Jerusalem where Lehi and Sariah, his father and mother, had reared their family of four sons, Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi. Jerusalem was in the land of Palestine, called Canaan by the inhabitants who lived there. The eastern boundary of this land

was perhaps the Jordan River; its western boundary, the Mediterranean Sea. The river Jordan, connecting the Sea of Galilee with the Dead Sea, extended north and south between two mountain ranges. About eighteen miles north and west of the Dead Sea was the city of Jerusalem. At that period of time it was the crossroads between the fertile crescent and Egypt. (See *The Relief Society Magazine*, January 1952, page 50.)

Because it was situated between two great civilizations, the citizens of Jerusalem came into contact with the Egyptians and Babylonians. These civilizations, especially the Egyptians, contributed to the culture of the populace in Jerusalem. (Hugh Nibley, "Lehi in the Desert," *The Improvement Era*, Volume LXIII, January, 1950, pp. 14-16; 66, 71; see also, February, 1950, pp. 102-104; 155-157). With this historical information in mind, we can readily understand why Nephi wrote that he made a record in the language of his father, which consisted of the learning of the Jews and the *language of the Egyptians*.

Not only did he have a knowledge of the Egyptian language, but he read from the plates of brass, which were written in the Hebrew language, but in the reformed Egyptian characters. He quoted much from Isaiah and expounded Isaiah's prophecies.

It was not only book learning, however, which constituted the education of Nephi. He was a practical man. He knew how to smelt ore from the rocks, how to make from the skins of animals a bellows with which to blow a fire, how to fabricate bows and arrows, how to hunt

successfully, how to construct buildings of wood and cement, and how to manufacture swords patterned after the sword of Laban.

Educated under divine tutorship, for he was carried away in the spirit and saw and talked with the Spirit of the Lord and with angels, and was shown visions, he possessed a knowledge of God's dealings with mankind. He knew how to place first things first. He submitted his problems to God and received an answer.

As a young man, he was told by the Lord that he was to be a ruler and teacher of his older brothers, who were incredulous and recalcitrant like the Jews in Jerusalem. In his association with his brothers, he was firm in his attitude, for he knew his position was right, and yet he was kind and forgiving. Hatred and revenge never found expression in the life of Nephi.

His forgiving nature is aptly illustrated by an incident which occurred on the return journey from Jerusalem to the valley of Lemuel with Ishmael and his family. There was a minor rebellion in the camp because Laman, Lemuel, and part of Ishmael's family had determined to return to Jerusalem. Nephi pleaded with them to continue their journey, pointing out to them that Jerusalem would surely be destroyed. Angered against Nephi, they bound him with cords and planned to leave him in the wilderness to be eaten by the wild beasts. Miraculously delivered, Nephi again reproved his brothers. The Lord softened their hearts so that they begged Nephi for forgiveness. Nephi, recording the event on the small plates of Nephi, simply wrote

“And it came to pass that I did frankly forgive them all that they had done” (1 Nephi 7:21).

He must have experienced to the full the joy which arises in the human heart by returning good for evil. The gospel to him was something to be lived, not alone something to be taught. His conscience was so tender that sins which might not disturb the average man bore down upon him almost to the point of despair. Suffering from a feeling of his own unworthiness, on one occasion, Nephi engraved the following message on his record:

. . . my heart exclaimeth . . . O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities. I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me. And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted (2 Nephi 4:17-19).

The verses which follow are an eloquent expression of Nephi's trust in the Lord and of his gratitude for the great things he had been shown and the mercy of the Lord.

My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep.

He hath filled me with his love, even unto the consuming of my flesh.

He hath confounded mine enemies, unto the causing of them to quake before me.

Behold, he hath heard my cry by day, and he hath given me knowledge by visions in the night-time.

And by day have I waxed bold in mighty prayer before him; yea, my voice

have I sent up on high; and angels came down and ministered unto me.

And upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceeding high mountains. And mine eyes have beheld great things, yea, even too great for man; therefore I was bidden that I should not write them.

O then, if I have seen so great things, if the Lord in his condescension unto the children of men hath visited men in so much mercy, why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken, because of mine afflictions?

And why should I yield to sin, because of my flesh? Yea, why should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have placed in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul? Why am I angry because of mine enemy? (2 Nephi 4:20-27).

In deepest humility and thanksgiving Nephi then explains:

Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin . . . Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say: O Lord, I will praise thee forever; yea, my soul will rejoice in thee, my God, and the rock of my salvation. O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul? Wilt thou deliver me out of the hands of mine enemies? Wilt thou make me that I may shake at the appearance of sin?

May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite! O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me, that I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road! O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness! (2 Nephi 4:28, 30-33).

This complete prayer (2 Nephi 4:17-35) is in a category with the great recorded prayers of the world. It was uttered with faith in God. It came from the depths of a sin-

cere heart. It acknowledged the hand of God in all things. It requested blessings that are of true worth. This prayer reveals Nephi's beliefs and aspirations, as does the sincere prayer of any man. In all the important decisions of his life, he sought the wisdom and favor of God. Desirous to see the things his father had witnessed in visions, he prayed fervently and was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, into an "exceeding high mountain" where he was privileged to behold much that would happen in the world to the end of time.

His account of this vision, which he received in the valley of Lemuel, together with the prophecy which he gave near the end of his life, clearly indicate the extent of his knowledge of what would happen to the various divisions of the house of Israel and to the Gentiles. These two sources, and the vision of John on the Isle of Patmos give us a prophetic history of significant events in the history of the world. Nephi's vision and his prophecy give us clear implications of his spiritual strength. Restricted space prevents further analysis of this important characteristic of Nephi.

As we delve into the life of this great spiritual leader, we find other qualities worthy of consideration. When his father led the little colony from the valley of Lemuel into the wilderness along the borders of the Red Sea, they were deprived of many of the comforts of life, which they had enjoyed in Jerusalem. The members of the group experienced conditions which tried their souls and tested their faith and intelligence. One of these experiences occurred not long after they

left the valley of Lemuel. They had camped to rest themselves and to replenish their food supply. While hunting, Nephi broke his fine steel bow. It was the last one they possessed, because the bows of the others had lost their spring.

The older brothers were fearful that they would not be able to kill the beasts of the forest. They complained about their sufferings and afflictions in the wilderness. Nephi, always able to accommodate himself to the situation at hand, conceived the idea of making a bow and arrow from wood, and of preparing a sling and stones. Armed with these weapons, he obtained food for the group. They rejoiced exceedingly. It was Nephi's initiative and Nephi's resourcefulness which had saved the little colony in its hour of distress.

His ability as a leader, as contrasted with the ability of two of his older brothers, Laman and Lemuel, is evident from the civilization which he built after separating from them in the land of promise. He taught his people to construct buildings, to work with wood, iron, copper, brass, steel, gold, silver, and precious ores. He built a temple, constructed after the pattern of the temple of Solomon and its workmanship was "exceeding fine," although it was not built of so many precious things, for they were not to be found upon the land.

He taught them the value of industry, and of employing their hands, undoubtedly recognizing the fruits of industry and the curative power of honest labor. Because of his obedience and his spiritual knowledge, Nephi built a civilization of culture and greatness.

His brothers, Laman and Lemuel, were cursed with a dark skin for their iniquity. Their descendants became "an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety" (2 Nephi 5:24).

In his second book, Nephi summarizes what he attempted to accomplish among his people. He tried to persuade them to do good. He explained the history of their fathers, the tribes of Israel, and God's covenants with them. He spoke of Jesus who was to come to earth to save mankind and exhorted them to believe in him. He re-proved the sins of the people and encouraged them to endure in faith to the end (2 Nephi 32:4).

Near the close of his writings Nephi reveals the great charity which was in his heart for all mankind and particularly for his people, when he wrote:

But I, Nephi, have written what I have written, and I esteem it as of great worth, and especially unto my people. For I pray continually for them by day, and mine eyes water my pillow by night because of them; and I cry unto my God in faith, and I know that he will hear my cry (2 Nephi 33:3).

Scholar, statesman, man of God—these are appellations that apply to this great character who was promised by the Lord that he should be a leader and a teacher of his brothers, which promises were literally fulfilled.

Questions on the Lesson

1. What are the two basic characteristics of Nephi? Justify your answer.
2. How did Nephi exemplify his forgiving nature?
3. Can you show that Nephi believed in the application of religious truths to life?
4. How do you know that Nephi was prayerful?

Visiting Teacher Messages

Book of Mormon Gems of Truth

Lesson 14—"Wherefore, the Lord God Gave Unto Man That He Should Act for Himself. Wherefore, Man Could Not Act for Himself Save It Should Be That He Was Enticed by the One Or the Other" (2 Nephi 2:16).

For Tuesday, March 3, 1953

Objective: To bring to our minds an awareness of the importance of free agency, and to stimulate its intelligent use.

PERHAPS never before in the history of the world has the free agency of man been so gravely threatened. Perhaps never before has the need been greater for an awakening, on the part of all mankind, to the worth of this principle.

The right to make our own decisions is one of the basic privileges

granted to man. It is God-given and an eternal principle. At the council in heaven Satan presented a plan for the redemption of man which would have denied him his agency. Our Heavenly Father disapproved that plan because it was not in accord with divine law. How we should cherish the principle of