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Characters and Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Lesson 21—The Record of Zeniff

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Theology—Characters and Teachings
of The Book of Mormon

Lesson 21—The Record of Zeniff

Elder Leland H. Monson

(Text: The Book of Mormon: Mosiah 9-22)

For Tuesday, February 2, 1954

Objective: To show the wisdom of following the admonitions of prophets.

Zeniff Seeks to Possess Lehi-Nephi

THE record of Zeniff is an account of the people who left Zarahemla (near 200 B.C.) and went to the land of Lehi-Nephi. Zeniff had made an earlier expedition to this land as a member of a large group. He had been sent as a spy among the Lamanites who possessed the land of their forefathers and was impressed with that which was good among them. He had returned to the camp of the expedition with the recommendation that they make a treaty of peace with the Lamanites, but this policy had been rejected by their austere and bloodthirsty leader.

Many members of the group, however, joined with Zeniff in his pleas. Altercations arose, and soon the members of the expedition were in the throes of civil strife. Father fought against father, and brother against brother, until only fifty remained to return to the city of Zarahemla to report to wives and children what had happened.

Zeniff, overzealous to inherit the land of his fathers, organized another group under his leadership, with the avowed intention of making a treaty of peace with the Lamanites in the land of Lehi-Nephi. Suffering from famine and other afflictions, because they were slow to remember the Lord, they journeyed through the wilderness to the place where their brethren had been slain.

*Zeniff Given Land by
Crafty Lamanite King*

Zeniff took four men, went into the city, talked with the king of the Lamanites, and was granted the privilege of possessing the land of Lehi-Nephi and the land of Shilom in peace. With considerable pride he returned to the encampment and reported that the king of the Lamanites had covenanted with him that he might have the land of Lehi-Nephi for his people.

But Zeniff had misjudged his man. He had taken for sincerity an action that was crafty and filled

with greed and malice. Zeniff had taken as sterling that which was but a base imitation. The king of the Lamanites knew that the industry of these Nephites would create much wealth which subsequently he could force them to yield to him.

True to this covenant, the king of the Lamanites commanded his own people to leave Lehi-Nephi, and Zeniff and his colony moved in. They constructed buildings and repaired the walls of the two cities, Lehi-Nephi and Shilom. They began to till the fertile land, to plant corn, wheat, barley, neas, sheum, and all kinds of fruit. For twelve years these Nephites were given every opportunity as a free and independent people.

War With the Lamanites

Then the Lamanites, lazy and idolatrous, showed signs of wanting to make them captives. In the thirteenth year, a numerous host of Lamanites made war upon those who were on the south of the land of Shilom as they were quietly feeding their flocks and tilling their land. The Nephites, who escaped, rushed to Zeniff in the city of Nephi and called for help. Zeniff armed them with bows, arrows, swords, clubs, cimeters, and slings, and they went forth to battle against the Lamanites. In the strength of the Lord they went. Three thousand and forty-three Lamanites lost their lives in a day and a night, and two hundred seventy-nine Nephites were slain. The Lamanites were driven from the land. As Zeniff said, "And God did hear our cries and did answer our prayers" (Mosiah 9:18).

Realizing that he could no longer depend upon the covenant that King Laman had made, Zeniff prepared for war. He stationed guards roundabout the land and manufactured weapons of war. For nine or ten years more they lived in peace. The men carried on their agricultural pursuits, and the women made all kinds of fabrics for clothes.

Then King Laman died, and his son ascended the throne. By means of spies, Zeniff soon discovered that the new king was stirring his people up in rebellion against the Nephites and was preparing for an attack. Armed with bows, arrows, swords, cimeters, stones, and slings, and dressed in leather loincloths, they attacked the Nephites north of the land of Shilom.

Zeniff made hasty preparations, had the women and children hidden in the wilderness, and equipped all men who were able to bear arms, both old and young. The Nephites, fighting in the strength of the Lord to protect their wives and children and property, drove the Lamanites out of their lands.

Those Lamanites were a wild and ferocious people, who were filled with a spirit of hatred and revenge. From childhood they had been taught that the Nephite forefathers had wronged their forefathers, that Nephi had assumed authority over them, and had stolen their records. This spirit of envy and hatred was a result of training from infancy.

The contrast is striking between the two people. The Nephites fought for that which was just and true, and knew the Lord was on their side. The Lamanites were

fighting with the spirit of hatred and murder, seeking to make others suffer that they might have revenge.

Noah Becomes King

As a result of the battle, the Nephites were able again to settle down to their peaceful pursuits, to tend their flocks, and to till the ground. It was about 160 B.C. when Zeniff found it necessary, because of old age, to confer the kingdom upon his son, Noah.

But Noah who received the kingdom, did not walk in the ways of his father and was not fitted to rule a people. He dismissed his father's righteous priests and installed wicked men in the priestly offices. Noah and these wicked priests refused to obey Nephite law, which required that one man should have but one wife and that he should not have any concubines. For the purpose of satisfying their lustful desires, they had many wives and concubines; and they felt that the people should support them in luxury, which they did by paying a fifth tax of their gold, silver, ziff, copper, brass, iron, fatlings, and grain.

King Noah built many elegant and spacious buildings. He planted vineyards throughout the land and his people became wine-bibbers.

Abinadi the Prophet Cries Repentance

One man named Abinadi went forth among the people calling them to repentance, saying,

Behold, thus saith the Lord . . . Go forth, and say unto this people . . . Wo be unto this people, for I have seen their abominations, and their wickedness, and their whoredoms; and except they repent

I will visit them in mine anger . . . I will deliver them into the hands of their enemies; yea, and they shall be brought into bondage; and they shall be afflicted by the hand of their enemies . . . and none shall deliver them, except it be the Lord the Almighty God. Yea, and it shall come to pass that when they shall cry unto me I will be slow to hear their cries . . . And except they repent in sackcloth and ashes, and cry mightily to the Lord their God, I will not hear their prayers, neither will I deliver them out of their afflictions (Mosiah 11:20 ff.).

Noah was wroth and said:

Who is Abinadi, that I and my people should be judged of him, or who is the Lord, that shall bring upon my people such great affliction? (Mosiah 11:27).

He planned to take the life of Abinadi, but the Lord delivered him out of their hands.

Two years later Abinadi returned in disguise to warn the people again according to the commandment of the Lord. This time he was more specific as he prophesied, saying:

It shall come to pass that this generation, because of their iniquities, shall be brought into bondage, and shall be smitten on the cheek; yea, and shall be driven by men, and shall be slain; and the vultures of the air, and the dogs, yea, and the wild beasts, shall devour their flesh. And it shall come to pass that the life of King Noah shall be valued even as a garment in a hot furnace. . . . I will smite this my people with sore afflictions, yea, with famine and pestilence . . . I will cause that they shall have burdens lashed upon their backs; and they shall be driven before like a dumb ass (Mosiah 12:2 ff.).

The people were angry, and they delivered Abinadi to King Noah, who had him committed to prison, and finally brought before him and the priests for questioning. Abinadi withstood them in all their questions, and confounded them in their

words. One of the priests, in order to trick him, asked him to explain a quotation from the scriptures. Abinadi responded:

Are you priests, and pretend to teach this people, and to understand the spirit of prophesying, and yet desire to know of me what these things mean? . . . Ye have not applied your hearts to understanding; therefore, ye have not been wise. Therefore, what teach ye this people? (Mosiah 12:25, 27).

He then reproved them bitterly for not keeping the law of Moses, for setting their hearts on riches, and following harlots.

After Abinadi rebuked the king and priests, Noah said, "Away with this fellow, and slay him" (Mosiah 13:1). Abinadi withstood them, however, and said,

Touch me not, for God shall smite you if ye lay your hands upon me, for I have not delivered the message which the Lord sent me to deliver (Mosiah 13:3).

The people dared not lay hands on Abinadi for the Spirit of the Lord was upon him and his face shone with luster. Abinadi finished his message. He read to them the ten commandments, asserting that the people had not lived them, and gave them another prophecy, saying:

But this much I tell you, what you do with me, after this, shall be as a type and a shadow of things which are to come (Mosiah 13:10).

Abinadi then told them that the Lord had given the children of Israel the law of Moses, "A law of performances and of ordinances . . . to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him" (Mosiah 13:30) but he warned that

without the atonement people "must unavoidably perish, notwithstanding the law of Moses." He quoted Isaiah (compare Isaiah chapter 53) to establish the fact that Isaiah had prophesied that God himself should come down and redeem his people. Abinadi delivered a powerful and wonderful discourse. He said that the Son would offer his life to expiate the sins of all men who would repent, and would redeem all mankind from the grave, and he taught of the resurrection and judgment.

Abinadi Burned at the Stake

When Abinadi finished his sayings, Noah commanded the priests to have Abinadi slain. After three days in prison they bound him and scourged his skin with faggots. Amidst the pain of burning at the stake, he made his final prophecy, saying:

. . . Ye shall be taken by the hand of your enemies, and then ye shall suffer, as I suffer, the pains of death by fire (Mosiah 17:18).

Abinadi sealed the truth of his words by his death.

King Noah Slain by Fire

Contention crept among the people, some being for and some against King Noah. Gideon fought against King Noah, who climbed the tower to save his life, but Gideon pursued him. However, seeing the Lamanites coming to battle against them, King Noah pleaded for his life, and Gideon spared him. King Noah commanded his people to rush for safety into the wilderness with their women and children. The Lamanites soon over-

took them and began to slay them. As a precautionary measure, and as a means of saving his life, Noah commanded the men to desert their wives and children and to flee.

Those who refused to flee and remained with their wives and children had their fair daughters plead with the Lamanites to spare them. The hearts of the Lamanites were softened and they agreed to let them live in Lehi-Nephi if they would deliver up King Noah and forfeit one half of all their property. Limhi, a son of King Noah, was among this captive group. He did not wish his father to be destroyed, but Gideon and his men secretly searched for King Noah. They found his followers, except for the wicked priests who had escaped by fleeing, but they had already burned Noah, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Abinadi.

Limhi Made a Tributary King

These Nephites now returned to the land of Lehi-Nephi with Gideon. Limhi had the kingdom conferred upon him by his captive people. He covenanted with the Lamanites to pay one half of all they possessed as tribute. The Nephites had peace for a period of two years at the expiration of which time the wicked priests of King Noah spirited away twenty-four of the daughters of the Lamanites. The king of the Lamanites, supposing the Nephites to have committed the crime, sought revenge of Limhi and his people. In the battle which

followed the king of the Lamanites was injured and left behind. The Nephites cared for his wounds and took him to Limhi. Soon the misunderstanding was cleared up. The Lamanite king pacified his people, and the Nephites returned to their land.

Subsequently the Nephites fought three battles with the Lamanites in an effort to free themselves from captivity, but each time they failed. These struggles and their captivity humbled the Nephites, but the Lord was slow to hear their cries because of their iniquities. He did, however, begin to soften the hearts of the Lamanites.

Only after a period of hardship and trouble in captivity did the Lord bring Ammon and his fifteen strong men to help the Nephites throw off the Lamanite yoke that they had been required to bear. Disciplined mightily by adversity, they secretly escaped under the leadership of Ammon, to Zarahemla.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the central theme of this lesson?
2. Discuss the relationship between the moral deterioration of a people and destruction.
3. If it is true of a nation, is it true of individuals?
4. How is laxity on the part of persons occupying positions of responsibility conducive to lower standards among the people?
5. Why did God exact a high degree of repentance as a basis for forgiveness?

