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Plain and Precious Prophecy

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Abstract: Nephi concentrated on the hopeful future—our day, when his family’s descendants are beginning to flourish—rather than ugly details of intervening history. Nephi’s prophecies focused on people and principles, as he viewed the “sweep of history and God’s plan.” Almost half of Nephi’s discourse about his vision was related to the influence of a book of scripture.

Plain and Precious Prophecy

by John L. Sorenson*

WHAT is it like to prophesy? When the ancient seers looked down through time in vision, what did they see, and how did they tell what they saw? We can learn something about the answers to these questions by studying what Nephi wrote when he viewed our day while he was "carried away in the spirit."

Imagine that you had the opportunity for just five minutes to examine in a foreign library a great picture book showing life in Palestine in the times of the Saviour. What would you write to your loved ones about what you saw? Since you could not tell nearly all that you saw even in that short time, would you focus on exotic details and striking single events? More likely you would choose to remember and relate the most impressive, useful and enduring ideas you encountered in the volume.

Nephi did just that in writing in a short 48 verses (*1 Nephi* 13:12 to 14:17) his account of what future generations would want most to know. He includes a few single events, so we cannot doubt that he saw vivid detail; but what he wrote about were key events in the latter-days, the main characters and the chief problems related to his people. Instead of picturing missiles or ocean liners or refrigerators or baseball games, he chose to tell of the two really important things in our, or any other, time: people and principles.

The prophet saw tiny, brave vessels crossing the Atlantic from Spain, Portugal, England, and France. These newcomers flooded the New World in a few short generations from the beachheads established by intrepid colonists and adventurers—Ojeda in Panama, Bastidas and Heredias in Colombia, Mendoza in Argentina, and the Pilgrims in Massachusetts. Log cabins, adobe churches, brigantines, orchards, all came, changed, grew; but Nephi did not have time nor space to note the scenery.

(For Course 12, lesson of November 11, "Nephi Views Our Day"; for Course 4 teachers, lessons of November 25 and December 2, "The Book of Mormon Is a Record"; for Course 6, lesson of October 21, "The Book of Mormon—the Word of the Lord"; and for Course 28, lessons of September 2 to 16, "The Book of Mormon.")

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And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, . . . and he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land. And . . . I beheld the Spirit of God, that it wrought upon other Gentiles; and they went forth out of captivity, upon the many waters. And . . . I beheld many multitudes of the Gentiles upon the land of promise; . . . and they did prosper and obtain the land for their inheritance; . . . (1 Nephi 13:12-15.)

The sweep of history and God's plan were the prophet's concern.

The young leader also saw his own descendants and what happened to them. To us this part of history is full of gory altars, feathered buffalo hunters, tomahawks, and burning cabins. Certainly the spread of Europeans throughout the hemisphere involved these picturesque scenes; but even more destructively significant in the long run to the native inhabitants were the ravages of smallpox, the ill-fed decades of slave labor in damp silver mines and isolated haciendas, as well as the confusion of Indian fighting Indian with the new weapons eager white men sold them. Throughout the lands the story of depopulation was repeated over and over. Peru's three million Indians become only a fifth of that in 130 years; the 200,000 plus on the island of Hispaniola became only two small villages within the span of a single lifetime after Europeans arrived.

Nephi might have told us some depressing details of this sort, but probably he purposely passed quickly over those sad episodes in the lives of his father's descendants.

. . . And I beheld the wrath of God, that it was upon the seed of my brethren; and they were scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten. (1 Nephi 13:14.)

Despite the power of the Gentile nations and the afflictions of Nephi's own descendants, he had a hopeful glimpse of a better future. Later Book of Mormon prophets dwelt at greater length on the glorious future awaiting their people in the distant future, after the dwindling; but Nephi at least knew from his vision ". . . that the Lord God will not suffer that the Gentiles will utterly destroy the mixture of thy seed, which are among thy brethren." (*1 Nephi* 13:30.)

Indeed, the natives of America have begun the dramatic kind of resurgence Nephi barely hints at. In North America today there are almost as many of these people as when Columbus came; Indian population is growing 50 per cent faster than that of non-Indians, and in some cases they are prospering financially, too. The millions of Indians

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auxiliaries, etc. From here the sky is the limit. Responsibility added at a consistent and steady rate is desirable.

The last step is actually a final part of each of the preceding three. This requires the constant addition of encouragement, gratitude, and recognition of accomplishment. This need not and should not be flowery mouth service, but genuine and from the heart. A pat on the back will do much more than a kick. Mothers know that the weariness of many hours' labor for loved ones can be wiped out by the words, "Thanks, it was a lovely meal."

The least bit of thanks brings pleasure, as this poem expresses so well:

Sometime — Somewhere

*You gave on the way a pleasant smile,
And thought no more about it.
It cheered a life that had been hard the while,
Which might have been wrecked without it.
And so for that smile and fruitage rare,
You'll reap a crown, sometime—somewhere.*

*You spoke one day a cheering word,
And passed to other duties.
It cheered a heart; new promise stirred,
And painted a life with beauties.
And so for that word of golden cheer,
You'll reap a talent, sometime—somewhere.*

*You lent a hand to a fallen one,
A lift in goodness given.
You saved a soul when help was rare,
And won an honest heart forever.
And so, for that help you proffered there,
Kind friend, you'll reap a joy, sometime—
somewhere.*

—Author unknown.

By following these steps in a natural sequence, we can develop a hardworking, self-feeding, self-driving, happy laborer in the kingdom of our Heavenly Father. In this way we share God's glory. Said He:

For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man. (Moses 1:39.)

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of the Andean nations are slowly gaining economic and social justice. The Alliance for Progress program promises even greater things to come. Brazil's heroic Indian service has been sending out devoted men to rescue remnants of hundreds of tribes and bands whose lives have been disrupted by the pioneering surge of Europeans across that vast land. Perhaps Nephi saw this, too, but he said little.

Seemingly one of the sights that most impressed the Book of Mormon leader was the presence and influence of a book, ". . . the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. . ." (1 Nephi 13:39.) Almost half Nephi's discourse concerning his vision has to do with the book. He said it was ". . . of great worth unto the Gentiles" (1 Nephi 13:23); ". . . it contained the plainness of the gospel of the Lord, . . ." (1 Nephi 13:24), at least before it was changed by scheming men; ". . . it goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles; . . ." (1 Nephi 13:29); ". . . it came forth from the Gentiles unto the remnant of the seed . . ." of Lehi (1 Nephi 13:38); and ". . . other books, . . ." were to come forth from the Gentiles ". . . unto the convincing of the Gentiles and the remnant of the seed of my brethren, . . . that the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true." (1 Nephi 13:39.)

Clearly the book of scripture was what gave the Gentiles much of their power. Millions were conquered by Cortez' handful of daring soldiers and

Pizarro's few, upheld by the conviction that the book gave them leave and authority to do it in the name of God. But possession of the book led Gentiles to more than conquest. The Jesuit priests in Paraguay guiding a hundred thousand Indians toward their version of the City of God, the civilizing Franciscans of California and Mexico, and the Bible-reading Yankees of New England have put some of the book's impress on whole civilizations by their patient, continuing belief.

There was much, much more that Nephi gave us only in kernel form. About the way the "plain and precious parts" of the book were removed, for example. (See 1 Nephi 13:28-35.) (The Prophet Joseph Smith's inspired revision of the Bible added over two hundred eighty verses and corrected more than two thousand.) Nor did he detail the "wars and rumors of wars" he saw besetting our day. He only concerned himself with the big picture. The bits and pieces of the story must seem unimportant after one has seen thousands of years and millions of people pass before one's consciousness. People and principles matter most.

Was Nephi sorry he could not tell more? It seems not. He ended his account with the patience and perspective we would expect:

. . . The things which I have written sufficeth me; . . . and if all the things which I saw are not written, the things which I have written are true. And thus it is. Amen. (1 Nephi 14:28, 30.)