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The Sariah Dilemma: Finding Increased Faith When Our Children Misplace Their Own



Vickey Taylor

The Book of Mormon begins in a manner that I love. Nephi—a child who never misplaced his faith in God and in Christ—summarizes that he was well educated [because he had “goodly parents”—parents whose net worth allowed him the privilege to study], that his life & the life of his family were wrought with affliction, and that his days, nevertheless, were highly favored of the Lord.

It is interesting to think of how the account would have come out if Lehi had written it, if one of Nephi’s older brothers had written it (wouldn’t that have been interesting!) or if Sariah, Nephi’s mother, had given us the account. As a mother myself, I have a unique ‘take’ of the things that happen in my family; different in perspective, I am sure, from the account you would get from one of my children.

I feel certain that Sariah must have had a dilemma, leaving her home behind and traveling into the wilderness with her husband and children, some of whom were out of control and wreaking havoc for the rest of them. Murmuring a bit, she came to understand the Lord’s purposes. It surely must have helped her, as a mother, to deal with the children whose faith was very much misplaced.

For any of us who have had our hearts broken and our ideals shattered by our children’s choices to temporarily toss the teachings of truth aside, Sariah and Lehi’s family is a prototype.

Parents of wayward children commonly agonize over questions like “What did I do wrong?” or “How have I failed?” The most common first reactions are guilt, anger, depression, hurt, or the impression that our teachings have been for naught. The feelings of failure may become a wall in the path of our own progression.

In reality, our children’s rebellious choices may offer us the opportunity to learn more about our personal relationship with Christ, and gain a sweeter understanding of the Savior’s role in our lives than we might have imagined.

How do we remain “whole” when we feel as though we are broken apart? How do we obtain needed healing when it seems as though there is no energy within us to mend? How do we cling to hope when we feel hopeless?

This heavy, heart-rending issue is too much for us as followers of Christ, unless we allow Him to carry us and our burdens. The first and most central assistance to be gained is from the Savior, whose shoulders are broad, strong, and whole enough to tend to us *and* our children.

Our first choice would be to have children who are so well taught and conditioned to righteousness that they would be like the little girl who went shopping with her mother at a large department store. Following closely as her mom shopped, she grew tired and sat down on the floor. Watching people around them, the little girl failed to notice her mother move on, and her mother was not aware that the little girl didn’t follow her. Soon the little girl realized that her mother was nowhere in sight and she began to cry.

A clerk came to her rescue and learned that this little girl had lost her mommy. She took her by the hand and walked up and down the aisles, but Mommy was nowhere to be found. Following an idea that popped in her head, the clerk asked the little one if she thought her mommy would recognize her voice, and the little girl nodded her head.

Over at the service counter, the little girl stood on a chair so that she could reach the microphone for the PA system. The clerk urged her to speak into the microphone so that her mother would hear her voice, and come get her. The sweet little one held that microphone close to her mouth and, with tears running down her cheeks and a sob in her voice, she said:

“I would like to bear my testimony; I know this Church is true.”

Oh, that it was this easy to rescue our children when they are temporarily lost! When the situation is heavier, and the task is filled with bitter anguish, it is important that we not lose our own way, nor break under the load of hurt and pain.

There is a better way—a way that Sariah and Lehi surely followed.

Many times, we have heard the scriptural examples of righteous parents with wayward children. Interesting, isn't it that the examples of Lehi, Alma, even Adam and Eve – so many righteous people whose children wandered—don't seem to compensate for our own inferior feelings when we are faced with similar conditions?

The change within us comes when we stop comparing ourselves- even to those whose own children's wanderings are captured in the scriptures—and begin *changing ourselves*. With this change in ourselves, we can find more peace – a peace that is not dependent upon our children “behaving”, but upon our greater hope in the Atonement and in the Eternal Plan.

President Boyd K. Packer once taught,

“The measure of our success as parents will not rest solely on how our children turn out. That judgment would be just only if we could raise our families in a perfectly moral environment, and that is now not possible.

It is not uncommon for responsible parents to lose one of their children, for a time, to influences over which they have no control. They agonize over rebellious sons or daughters. They are puzzled over why they are so helpless when they have tried so hard to do what they should. It is my conviction that those wicked influences one day will be overruled.....”
[*Ensign*, May 1992, p. 68].

I think it is important to note that President Packer spoke these words more than seventeen years ago. How much has changed for the worse, in our moral climate, since 1992?

The Lord loves each child. His plan is eternal. His purposes are sure.

While our children may temporarily lose their faith, it is important that *we* maintain certain habits and a certain order so that our faith remains unshaken. We may, in fact, see the hand of God working in our lives and deepening our conviction of truth as we walk our mortal walk.

I offer a few reminders to keep us pointing in the direction of Christ, to making personally positive, life-affirming choices, and to remaining faithful to our own covenants.

1. Keep Sanity In Our Own Life

Dealing with the mental and emotional pain that comes with chaos surrounding our children's choices, we may be prone to keep ourselves in the middle of the storm. It is depleting. It does not help them or us.

Finding ways to take care of ourselves will diminish the murmuring and keep us more serene. If we remember that each of us answers individually to the Lord, maybe it will give us license to concentrate on our own journey, and act in an advisory capacity to our children—who will have their own interview with the Lord. He loves them more than we do. His Atonement was offered for them as well as us. His judgment is sure, while ours is spotty and without a full view.

So, let's be kind to ourselves. Normalcy as it was once known may be a thing of the past, but when dealing with the chaos of children's choices that often rob us of everything from sleep to money, we must seek the comfort of our places of peace when and how we can. Taking time to read good books, to exercise, to do little things that we enjoy can help us remember that we are in charge of our *own* life, and of our own relationship with God and Christ. Toss away the self-scorn. Refuse to be drawn into daily drama that accompanies the angry or defiant family member, and actively seek for peace.

I am not sure how Sariah accomplished this. Maybe it was because she also had a Nephi. If we lack a Nephi, perhaps there is a Jacob coming in the second or third generation. Time is not nearly as important to God as it is to us, because He knows the timing of all things.

2. Keep Focus On Our Spiritual Growth and Understanding

When the rains are coming down and the floods are coming up, it is important to keep our own spiritual reserves from becoming depleted. I realize that this is easier said than done. When we come to terms with the fact that we are not in charge, we can control nothing our family member does, but we can control our own actions and reactions, a new sense of reliance upon the Lord blossoms within us. We remember the counsel given us in 2 Nephi 2:27, "Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself."

Brothers and sisters, the devil has a heyday when we allow ourselves to be pulled down into misery by our reactions to our children's wrongful decisions.

2 Nephi 2:28 offers us the way to keep our spirits higher and our spiritual growth intact: "And now, my sons, I would that ye should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit."

The blessings of our covenants will continue for us in the needed ways. The strength of keeping the commandments will buoy us. To be able to "lose face, without losing heart" will grant us a measure of discipleship that may serve us well now and in times to come. [Elder Neal A. Maxwell, "If Thou Endure It Well" BYU Fireside, December 4, 1984.]

To have loving concern and sadness for our wayward children is expected and normal. Misery is optional. I believe Sariah would agree.

3. Keep Feeding the Good

There is a story of an old Cherokee man who told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people.

He said, "My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all.

One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought for a moment and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

While it is human nature to feel anger, regret, self-pity, resentment or any of the issues attached to the "first wolf" inside each of us, it is the second one we must focus on feeding. During time of crisis, to nourish the Good will bring us a greater capacity to deal with earthly problems. When the difficulties we see before us become overwhelming, it is necessary that we "Walk by faith, not by sight" [2 Cor. 5:7] and become "alive in Christ because of our faith" [2 Ne. 25:25].

At times of despair over our children's spiritual well-being, we are better served by sharpening our own spiritual tools and working on our own testimonies in order to better help our defiant family members.

4. Keep a Sense of Humor and an Optimistic View

Tough on occasion? Absolutely. But to work at cultivating a sweet sense of humor can carry us through tumultuous times.

I enjoy the story of a nine-year-old boy with an attitude, who announced to his parents at breakfast one morning, "I am running away from home tomorrow. Who is going to drive me?"

If a "merry heart doeth good like a medicine" [Proverbs 17:22], taking a humorous and optimistic approach to some of the issues that come from our children-with-attitude will offer us a dose of helpful medication. For the more severe and heart-rending issues we are called to deal with, it is difficult to find merriment. On our mortal journey, there are some steep climbs and difficult descents where there seems to be only darkness.

I like to reflect on the beautiful talk given by Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin at General Conference, October 2006. He speaks of the dark and stormy Friday on which our Savior was crucified. On Sunday, Christ arose from the dead and brought hope to all. Elder Wirthlin reminds us that "No matter our desperation, no matter our grief, Sunday will come. In the darkness of our sorrow, Sunday will come." As we look faithfully forward for better days, we may find more quiet joy in the small things that continue to serve us, as we serve the Lord. To keep a merry heart will bless us with more peace during times of turmoil.

5. Keep Our Job Separate from the Lord's

Brother Larry Barkdull told of a mother who wrote to him from Idaho about how alone and overwhelmed she felt. She was carrying the heavy burden of her child's redemption on her shoulders. This is a weight that none of us can carry! Only the Savior can carry this kind of crushing burden. He encouraged her to remember her covenant with the Lord, and the partnership involved. That covenant guarantees us that He will walk with us and lighten our burdens if we will give them over to Him.

Our part is different from our Savior's part. We become overwhelmed when we spin our wheels in a helpless plan to rescue and save our wayward child. That, brothers and sisters, is our Savior's job. Our job is to remember him and keep our faith and hope intact. Our job is to humble ourselves before

him and follow his loving counsel. Oh, the lightening of our load when we accept this truth! Our dilemma grows when we blur the lines of job description.

6. Keep Our Sights on the Plan of Redemption

When in the fiery furnace of dealing with errant children, we have the opportunity to grow our belief in Jesus Christ as the Deliverer and Redeemer. Rather than focus on our real or perceived failings as a parent, we may choose to concentrate on the divine role of the Savior.

He completed his part in the Eternal Plan. What can we do to complete *our* part of the plan? What blessings are in store for us as we yield to the Savior and pray for continued guidance? What promises might the Lord have in store for each of us?

The prophet Joseph Smith said, “Our Heavenly Father is more liberal in his views, and boundless in his mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive.” [*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (1976), 257, 240-41.]

God’s work is the work of redemption. We recall the scripture in Moses 1:39, “This is my work and my glory, to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” Because the Lords’ work is to redeem souls, He will do his work. He will continue until your son or daughter, until my son or daughter, cries out with humble heart, “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me.” (**Alma 36:18.**)

It is The Plan. It will not fail. He will not fail us, brothers and sisters.

7. Keep Praying

President Gordon B. Hinckley gave us the rule of thumb when dealing with careless children: “I hope you don’t lose patience with them; I hope you go on praying for them, and I don’t hesitate to promise that if you do, the Lord will touch their hearts and bring them back to you with love and respect and appreciation.” [Church News, Sept 2, 1995, Regional Conference in Great Britain].

Prayer works wonders. Prayer opens the portals of heaven. Prayer is balm for our sore hurts. Prayer, when it is in truth “the soul’s sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed” [Hymnbook, number 145], is answered. Perhaps in a distant day, and in a different way than we imagine, but prayers are answered.

At one point in our history, a telephone seemed an unneeded and unvalued device. In its infancy, a Western Union internal memo stated, “This ‘telephone’ has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.”

Can you imagine? We now need land lines, cell phones, texting—all sorts of devices in order to feel current and secure and in communication.

Over the course of our lives, as we pour out our hearts to our Father in prayer, the value of *this* type of communication becomes more evident. As with a telephone, we have to pick up the receiver and speak into our end of it. Then we must listen in order to receive the answers we are seeking. Despite our shortcomings, *this* means of communication always works. Like Sariah and Lehi surely did, we have to keep praying.

Our Father is not only concerned with our wandering children, but with *us* as well. He will never leave us alone and our prayers will not go unanswered. We just need to keep on utilizing this tool of communication, even when it seems hard to do so.

Despite the advice and comfort we receive from good family members, church leaders, and friends who have trodden a similar path, there is nothing to bring us so much comfort, consolation, and cure as Prayer.

8. Keep on Believing

A testimony of truth allows us the freedom to lean on the Savior. The scriptures give us understanding of the ways of the Lord. We can gain hope from what we learn. The study of Alma the younger is a premier example of the redemption of a wayward soul. He is spoken of as “a very wicked and an idolatrous man” [Mosiah 27:8] who, along with the sons of Mosiah, was the “very vilest of sinners” [Mosiah 28:4].

We can imagine that his parents never ceased praying for him. Though the scriptures do not name the prophet Alma’s wife, I think we may safely assume that both parents remained true to their covenants and trusted in the Lord. In due time Alma the younger repented of his sins and became a mighty man of God. We can imagine the joy that replaced the sorrow within a mother and a father who never lost faith in the Lord.

Any among our members who have children living in a wicked, vile way may take comfort from this example. If not today, this year, or in this life, our continued faithfulness will pay eternal dividends.

There is consolation in this counsel given by President Joseph Fielding Smith,

“Let the father and mother, who are members of this Church and Kingdom, take a righteous course, and strive with all their might never to do a wrong, but to do good all their lives; if they have one child or one hundred children, if they conduct themselves towards them as they should, binding them to the Lord by their faith and prayers, I care not where those children go, they are bound up to their parents by an everlasting tie, and no power of earth or hell can separate them from their parents in eternity; they will return again to the fountain from whence they sprang.” [*Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 volumes. 1954-56, 2:90-91.]

Even during the most vile and turbulent of times, when we are buffeted by Satan, feeling overwhelmed and under-prepared, the Savior will lead us. Our faith will increase based upon our determination to follow Him at any cost. Our hope is anchored to Christ and we are able to keep on believing.

Conclusion

We each have the chance to do as Lehi, Sariah, and their righteous children did:

“Wherefore ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ having a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold thus saith the Father, ye shall have eternal life.” 2 Ne 31:20.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught that “after you and I have passed breaking points without breaking, our virtues take the form of endurance” [“If Thou Endure It Well,” BYU Fireside, December 4, 1984.]

Endurance—a vibrant stamina—allows us to feast on the words of Christ and more deeply appreciate the promised blessings for those who will endure.

Back to Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin’s comforting words from October 2006 General Conference, “Each of us will have our own Fridays- those days when the universe itself seems shattered and the

shards of our world lie littered about us in pieces. We all will experience those broken times when it seems we can never be put together again.... But Sunday will come.”

A final recounting of counsel I would like to share with you today comes from Elder Orson F. Whitney:

“You parents of the willful and the wayward! Don’t give them up. Don’t cast them off. They are not utterly lost. Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return. ... They will suffer for their sins; and may tread a thorny path; but if it leads them at last, like the penitent Prodigal, to a loving and forgiving father’s heart and home, the painful experience will not have been in vain. Pray for your careless and disobedient children; hold on to them with your faith. Hope on, trust on, till you see the salvation of God...” [Orson F. Whitney, Conference Report (April 1929): 110]

Enduring faithfully, though our days may – like Nephi’s – be wrought with affliction, allows each one of us to continue steadfastly during our Fridays of testing, and look faithfully and hopefully forward to our Sunday, whether in this life or the life to come.

We may face many a dilemma in our parenting and grand parenting, brothers and sisters. There is only one way to find peace and to grow in a heavenly direction- that is to keep ourselves focused on Christ and his good word. He knows of our hurts, and of our sorrows. He loves us. He wants to succor our hurts. He knows how to do his job if we will allow him to do so.

It is my hope that we may find the peace we desire—even joy- during our times of dealing with our wayward children. It is my testimony that we can increase in our own faith until that promised day when the Savior gathers them safely within His fold.