

## 28

## ALMA 32–35

John W. Welch Notes

**Alma 32–33 Alma’s Words to the Zoramite Poor**

Alma 32 is often read and thought of as a unit, in and of itself a single composition. In fact, the report of Alma’s words on that occasion embrace both chapters 32 and 33. No break was intended between these two chapters. And then Amulek continues speaking to the poor Zoramites, standing as a second witness to what Alma has said. So, clearly, these chapters should be read together. And, in fact, in the first edition of the Book of Mormon, all of six chapters, Alma 30–35, were treated together as one long chapter, Chapter XVI (pp. 304–323).

Obviously, it is helpful for readers today to have all of this material broken into smaller chapters, but one should not forget that all of these six chapters together embrace what happened in the seventeenth year of the reign of the judges (about 74 BC). That year was marked by the splitting off of the Zoramites, by the problems created by Korihor that were narrowly averted, followed by Korihor’s demise among the Zoramites, and then confronted by the great doctrinal teachings of Alma and his strong contingent of companions trying to reconvert the Zoramites and to prevent them from entering into a dreaded alliance with the Lamanites. In spite of the brilliant words of both Alma and Amulek, that effort failed, and the Zoramite leaders went on to become the commanders of the armies that will be at war against the Nephites for the remaining years of the book of Alma.

Alma’s words in Alma 32–33 teach the following five main points:

1. The importance and blessings of being humble, even if it is a result of afflictions, mistreatment, and being cast out by others (32:6–16),
2. How true faith is obtained and its eternal fruit enjoyed (32:17–43),

3. The proper modes of prayer and worship, crying unto God in the wilderness and closet (33:2–11),
4. Believing on the Son of God (as taught by Zenos, Zenoch, and Moses) brings healing, not perishing, through the redemption of the Son of God that atones for their sins (33:12–21), and
5. The content of “the word” that should be planted in the heart (33:21–23).

Amulek’s second witness recapitulates and enhances these same points in the opposite order:

5. Admonishing them to “plant the word in your hearts” (34:4),
4. Believing in Christ, the Son of God, as testified by Zenos, Zenoch, and Moses (34:5–7), and how faith in Christ’s infinite atonement affords repentance and salvation (34:8–16),
3. The proper content of prayer, crying unto God in the wilderness and closet (34:17–26), as well as not turning away the needy (34:2–29),
2. Bringing forth fruit unto repentance and righteousness (34:30–36), and
1. Humbling yourself, worshipping God patiently in whatever place you may be (34:38), even if you are afflicted and cast out (34:39–41).

The intertextual dynamic of these two mutually reinforcing texts is marvelously and deeply impressive. Vast treatises could be written on the content and messages of these three chapters alone. Their axioms deal with the conditions of spirituality, the problems of evil and suffering, and responses to social injustice and poverty. Their instructions chart out the steps of nurturing faith, obtaining knowledge, worshipping, praying, and bringing forth the fruits of repentance. By planting their “word,” one understands the Atonement of the Son of God and the essence of the plan of salvation and redemption. Of all that could be said, only a relative few thoughts will be included in these notes, which I hope will be found helpful as sidebars to the words of Alma and Amulek themselves. Nothing replaces those words, just as the words of Alma and Amulek do not replace “the Word” which must ultimately be planted in our hearts as readers of these three chapters.

### **Alma 32:4 — Testimony Is a Process**

Alma taught the poor Zoramites who “were poor in heart, because of their poverty as to the things of the world.” (Alma 32:4). The people had been kicked out of the synagogues with their Rameumptoms, and even had to leave the City of Antionum. They flocked to the hill Onidah, where Alma could talk to them safely and openly.

The teaching of Alma and Amulek was quite different from what normal Protestant and Catholic teachings and prevailing views were like in the world at the time of the Restoration. They did not offer a revival-type event characterized by instant salvation. Instead, they taught these poor Zoramites that gaining a testimony is a developmental process. Faith will grow in stages if the seed is planted, nourished, protected, and attended to. He assured them that even once a person has gained a sure knowledge of a principle, that is not the end of the process. They have to go on by helping others. Thus, here, and in many other ways, the Book of Mormon stood out as something rather different from what contemporary Christians were used to.

### **Alma 32:7–8 — Lowly in Heart**

What might it mean to be “lowly in heart” (32:8)? These poor Zoramite people were certainly economically disadvantaged, and were already in a humble condition as measured by worldly wealth. However, Alma seems to make a distinction between being humble and being “lowly in heart.” These people had been forced to be humble, and yet Alma assured them, “I behold that ye are lowly in heart; and if so, blessed are ye” (32:8). The poor Zoramites were bereft spiritually at first, but they were not hard-hearted; and hard-heartedness may be the opposite of being *lowly in heart*. Alma encouraged them by saying, “Blessed are the lowly in heart,” that is, “You will be blessed if you are humble enough to go through this process of spiritual refinement and growth.”

### **Alma 32:12–16 — Compelled to Be Humble, Compelled to Know**

Being compelled to humility is one of Alma’s opening themes. Can anyone be humble without having been compelled to be humble? Are we not all compelled in one way or another? Alma commented, “Do ye not suppose that they are more blessed who truly humble themselves because of the word?” (Alma 32:14). He may have been referring to when we humble ourselves from an internal, self-motivated reason rather than because of some external matter. True humility comes through a personal choice, a willingness to respond to lacks and afflictions in a spiritually positive way.

The next phrase, being “compelled to know” (Alma 32:16), is closely related. Can we be *compelled* to know something? Again, the idea is, we are blessed if we are willing to accept the truth without having it absolutely proved or socially imposed upon us by prevailing ideologies. Alma may have been telling these people that they would be better off if they could have faith in the first place, because Alma himself knew that it was not a good thing to be compelled to know by an angel and trials, troubles, and afflictions.

### **Alma 32:12 — Learning Wisdom**

Alma wanted the humble Zoramites to “learn wisdom.” But how does one obtain this wisdom? It is one thing to gain “knowledge”; it is another to gain “wisdom.”

While a common definition says that wisdom is about what you do with what you know, Alma says that this is not just a matter of practical efficiencies. He said that it was necessary for these people to *learn* wisdom, and that doing so was necessary for their salvation. What might this mean? Well, if we are going to be judged according to what we have learned by how we act, think, talk, and what we do, we must strive to learn *wisdom* and to be counted wise in the eyes of our eternal judge, and not in the eyes of the world. That kind of wisdom may be gained only by *the blessings of the Holy Ghost*. Alma's words to the receptive Zoramites told them that it was necessary to have the Spirit of the Holy Ghost and to learn to obtain wisdom through that means.

### Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Did Nephi Work So Hard to Preserve the Wisdom He Had Received? \(1 Nephi 6:5–6\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 262 (January 16, 2017).

### Alma 32:13 — Finding Mercy

"He that findeth mercy shall be saved" (Alma 32:13). How is one supposed to *find* mercy? We may feel lost. We may feel that God has abandoned us or has left us bereft in some way. Certainly, the poor Zoramites felt that way. Alma promised them and us that we can find mercy through faith and repentance. Repentance is a process, and through that process we will figure out what it would take to find mercy.

Are we surprised when we find mercy? C. S. Lewis' book *Surprised by Joy* is a classic example of being surprised by an overwhelming feeling, in his case, of the joy that accompanies mercy. When we are feeling down, feeling low, suddenly joy may wash over us. It comes unexpectedly from somewhere, and when we stop and notice it, we actually *find* mercy. Mercy was there. It is not just that we receive mercy, or that God gives it to us, but we have to find it. It is there to be discovered and found. But it can also be overlooked. God will force no person to heaven. He also will not compel anyone to find and to enjoy joy.

### Further Reading

C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955).

### Alma 32:19–20 — Forgiving Transgressors

Alma did not directly tell the poor Zoramites that they had to forgive the rich Zoramites who had expelled them, but in reality, they were going to have to have a spirit of forgiveness in their hearts if they wanted to be forgiven of their own failings. Alma alluded to this when he preached, "How much more cursed is he that knoweth the will of God and doeth it not?" (32:19). The hitch is that we are going to be punished or cursed if we *know* the will of God and do not do it.

Alma next said, “Now of this thing ye must judge.” The word *must* is interesting. Judging between the two choices is not optional. We cannot avoid this either/or judgment. “Behold,” he says, “I say unto you that it is on the one hand even as it is on the other,” meaning that we will unavoidably reap the attendant consequences of our actions (or inactions), whether we opt for the one hand or the other hand. Choosing not to act is itself a choice.

The balanced sense of reciprocity of justice was a common biblical idea, and examples of this include the rule that if we want mercy, we have to give mercy; if we want forgiveness, we have to be forgiving; if we want to be given blessings, we have to bless and give to the poor; and if we are the poor, we must give to each other.

### **Alma 32:21 — Alma’s Discourse on Faith**

In this verse, Alma declares his famous statement, “If ye have faith ye *hope* for things which are not seen, *which are true*” (Alma 32:21). This is a classic consequentialist definition of faith. Alma’s view of faith is active (not substantive). If you have faith, you actively hope. Faith propels us to do the things that move us in the direction of that hoped-for and true, but yet unseen, goal. This is not a definition of what faith *is*, but what faith *does*. If you have faith, you necessarily hope.

Alma goes on to say: “[God] desires that, *in the first place*, ye should believe even on his *word*” (32:22). In a few verses we will learn what “*the word*” is (33:22). Of course, it has to do with believing in Christ and the plan of salvation. Thus, the *first* step or principle of the gospel of Jesus Christ and in His Church is faith, specifically in the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Further Reading**

Book of Mormon Central, “[Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge: Act in Faith](#) (1 Nephi 2:16),” *KnoWhy* 260 (January 11, 2017).

### **Alma 32:23 — God Imparts His Word to All Who Come to Him**

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has used this particular verse several times to speak of the equal access that all people have—men, women, and children, of all statures, of all status in society or cultures, the rich and the poor, of every nation, tongue and people—to the truth. Alma happened to be talking to the poor people when he said this. They felt like disenfranchised citizens in their own city. After having built the place, they had been kicked out of the synagogue, and it was here that Alma’s comment emphasized that God speaks to all people, and not just those who happen to be standing on the Rameumptom. God universally reveals His Spirit to all people who seek Him.

### **Alma 32:27–43 — Faith Grows Like a Seed**

Alma produced an unforgettable and very inspiring analogy. “Now, we will compare *the word* unto a seed” (Alma 32:4), in which the term, *the word* refers to the word of the Lord, the Gospel, or as people call it today, the *Good Word*. Ultimately, the elements in this “word” will be defined more specifically in Alma 33:22.

But verse 27 is a very important part of the beginning of this process. Alma explained that “even if ye can no more than *desire* to believe” the seed would begin to swell and then sprout, and as it grows, you will know that it was a good seed. Metaphorically, securely planting the message of the Gospel in our hearts, giving it room, not crowding it out, is the first step to growing our testimony.

What is “the seed”? In the musical, *The Fantastics*, there is a song called *Plant a Radish*. The lyrics say, “Plant a radish, Get a radish” and “Plant a carrot, Get a carrot.” If we do not plant the right seed, we are not going to get the results that Alma is talking about. *The word* is the truth of the Gospel and is represented by this seed. This is a big seed with many smaller parts. If you want to know the truth of the principle of tithing, you plant the tithing seed and it will grow. But if you want eternal life, you have to plant the seed of eternal life and then gain a testimony of that.

Alma teaches that obtaining a testimony is an experiential matter. To some philosophers, empirical knowledge is the only knowledge, the kind that you can measure or you can scientifically replicate. As has often been said, experiencing the word of God is something like tasting a strawberry. We can taste a strawberry, and distinguish it from other edibles, but it is impossible to describe the taste to someone who has never tasted one. Alma probably knew that these people had not yet tasted *the word*. They had come from a society that was anti-Christ, which had impeded their ability to gain spiritual experiences. So, Alma invited them to partake, and he was trying to communicate all the wonderful benefits of feasting on the word. However, since explaining a testimony is inadequate to one who has never experienced it, this metaphor helped to at least explain the steps one must go through to gain the effect for themselves. Follow the steps: Planting, nourishing, giving it care, giving it room, and giving it light. Do those and the spirit will grow and this seed will thrive.

### **Alma 32:28–35 — The Effects of the Word on Our Hearts**

We sometimes glide over these words, but they are beautiful. These phrases may puzzle and inspire us. Alma said that as this seed begins to “swell ... it beginneth to enlarge my soul” (32:28). Have you felt the gospel enlarging your soul? And how is that manifested? And is your soul still being enlarged from day to day?

When we accept the gospel and understand it, how does it taste? Alma tried to describe it in verse 28: “it is delicious to me.” He even described this fruit in terms of light, “After ye have tasted this light” (Alma 32:35). Alma is weaving together many different images—delicious taste, clear light. In a way, his use of this analogy is reminiscent of the Savior’s use of details in His parables.

Alma said, “Now, if ye give *place*, that a seed may be planted in your heart” (Alma 32:28). Things tend to crowd out the gospel, and we need to give it an unmistakable position. It will shrivel if we discard it off in some nethermost part of our lives; we need to give it a well-defined and ample place.

Giving the word a place in our hearts, also implies that we must give it prominence. In a similar way, Deuteronomy 12 speaks repeatedly of given the holy name of God “a place” where it could dwell, namely the temple in Jerusalem, and required that His people love him with all their hearts, mights, and strength. All that speaks volumes about prominence. If we love other things too much, or if we are getting too involved in things that take us away from the gospel, it will lose prominence. We cannot forget to nourish it properly, or else the seed will begin to wither. This is a dynamic process, as we help the tree to continue to grow and continue to bear fruit. Compare Alma’s words here with Zenos’s parable of the olive tree in Jacob 5, which speaks often of giving “place” (Jacob 5:13), and of nourishing “the root” (e.g. Jacob 5:18), preserving the tree and yielding fruit (Alma is well aware of Zenos’s biologically authentic allegory! And indeed, he will quote another text from Zenos farther down this speech, in 33:3–14.). We cannot just plant the seed once and then hope it will grow: “But if ye neglect the tree, and take no thought for its nourishment, behold it will not get any root; and when the heat of the sun cometh and scorcheth it, because it hath no root it withers away, and ye pluck it up and cast it out.” (Alma 32:38).

As the seed begins to swell, Alma told them, it will “enlarge your soul” (32:28). This is the litmus test for how we can tell whether something is really good or not. We have to give it some space. Give it a try, and if it *enlarges your soul*, we know it to be a good seed.

We often bear our testimony that we know the Church is *true*. I had a mission president who bore his testimony regularly that he knew the Church was *good*. He wanted people in Germany to know that this was a good way to live, and if they believed that it was good, and if they could taste that goodness, the knowledge of its truthfulness would be added so that they would know what they needed to know. I would like to hear more testimonies in our own midst of the goodness of the Church.

### Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Did Alma Use Creation Imagery in His Sermon on Faith? \(Alma 32:40\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 140 (July 11, 2016).

### **Alma 32:40–43 — The Word Will Grow to Become a Tree of Life**

In the garden of Eden there were two trees: the tree of knowledge, and the tree of life. If we have the experience Alma is talking about, we will become fruit-bearing trees in God's garden. That is a great promise and a way of relating us to having permanence and fruit-bearing capabilities. Fruit-bearing may also be, in a human case, posterity. And thus, we are blessed and promised that we can have eternal posterity.

This tree that Alma is alluding to is also the tree that Lehi saw, that had the fruit that was white above all that is white, the sweet fruit, "Whose fruit was desirable to make one happy" (1 Nephi 8:10). So Alma precisely describes the tree that will grow from the planting of the seed of the word as bearing "fruit" which is "most precious," "sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure" (32:42). It is interesting that Alma is using the tree of life as a similar metaphor, like the one found in Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision. However, in Lehi's vision, when people came to the tree of life, the tree was external to them. Lehi brought the people to the tree, and the ones who made it all the way there rejoiced, fell down, and were grateful that they had gotten there.

Moreover, there is another step beyond that first partaking of the fruit and knowing how delicious it is. It is through diligence and cultivation of this word that we may have the tree of life growing inside us. Alma went beyond where Lehi left off. Alma taught that we need to take the vision that Lehi saw and internalize it so much that the tree of life grows up inside each of us to give us eternal life.

We thus encounter three different perspectives on the tree of life in the Book of Mormon (Figure 1). In Jacob 5, Zenos' tree represents the House of Israel. Who are you in that allegory of the olive tree? Where are you on that tree? You may be a leaf or an olive, but you are just a very small part of that very big tree.

In 1 Nephi 8, Lehi's tree represents the goal of eternal life. We come to that tree, partake of the fruit, and stand under the tree. Although the tree is still external to us, we are now a much bigger part of that picture than individual people were in Zenos's allegory.

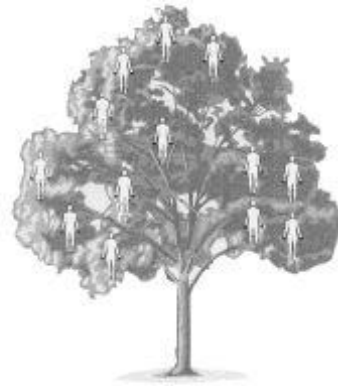
Finally, Alma wanted that tree of life to be in each one of us, where we will each become a tree of life planted in God's eternal paradise, and we will become a fruit-bearing tree that will produce eternal fruit for us and for others around us.



# Three Trees in the Book of Mormon

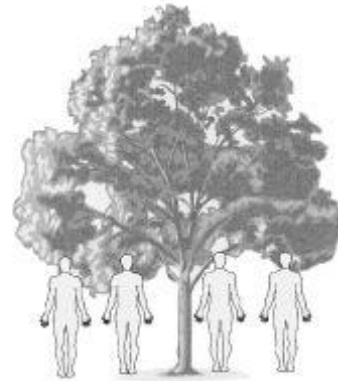
## Zenos's Olive Tree

The House of Israel  
Collective Salvation



## Lehi's Tree of Life

The Love of God  
Blessedness



## Alma's Tree of Righteousness

Personal Righteousness  
and Testimony

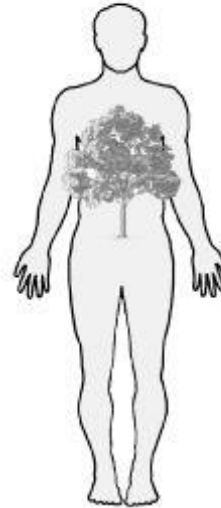


Figure 1 John W. Welch and Greg Welch. "Three Trees in the Book of Mormon," in *Charting the Book of Mormon*, chart 95.

## Alma 33

### **Alma 33:1–2 — We Can Pray or Worship Anywhere**

It is interesting that Alma, in the middle of giving one of the most profound doctrinal discussions of faith and testimony that can be found anywhere, is also able to relate to these people and solve their practical problems. They had been expelled from the places of worship they had built with their own hands; they felt that this excluded them from praying or worshipping with equal dignity.

Once we are aware of what the issues were for the Zoramite poor, we can see how effectively Alma addressed each one of their concerns, replacing what they had been taught, or maybe what they had never been taught, with the truths of the gospel. He did not ignore the realities of what they had been going through. Although Alma 32–33 is a very tightly argued and beautifully sophisticated message to the people, part of Alma’s skill lies in relating closely to them, addressing their immediate needs, and recognizing their difficulties.

### **Alma 33:3 — Pray for Wisdom and Knowledge**

The most important thing we can do to strengthen our faith is to pray. That is why Alma quoted the words that Zenos, the prophet of old, had spoken concerning prayer and worship. What Zenos had to say about prayer and worship was different from a Rameumptom prayer.

And just as Joseph Smith read in James 1:5, “If any of you *lack wisdom*, let him ask of God,” if we want to gain spiritual knowledge, we must, as Alma said, *learn wisdom*. If we lack wisdom, there is ultimately only one thing to do, and that is to pray—to ask God, and he will bless our hearts in many different ways so that our wisdom will grow. Too many discount prayer as the source of wisdom, and as a result, they are learned but not wise.

I suspect that Alma had not planned to recite this wonderful text from the ancient prophet Zenos when he prepared to go to Antionum. It was not until he and his companions got to Antionum and saw how the people were praying that they were astonished. Before that, they did not realize how far the apostasy had gone and how perfectly the ancient words of Zenos were what he needed to rehearse to them. Nevertheless, when the people asked him what they should do next, Alma asked them if they remembered the words of Zenos on this topic. He then quoted Zenos’s beautiful poetic text. In Alma 29 (“O that I were an angel”), Alma was able to give poetic expressions that really poured out his soul. I wonder if he learned how to do some of that by previously studying and memorizing the writings of Zenos.

### Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Did Nephi Work So Hard to Preserve the Wisdom He Had Received?](#) (1 Nephi 6:5–6),” *KnoWhy* 262 (January 16, 2017).

### Alma 33:3–11 — Zenos’ Poetic Expression of Gratitude on Prayer

Thirty years ago, I laid out Zenos’s words in a possible poetic form. I called this his poem *Hearing Mercy*. Alma wanted his audience to *find* mercy, and Zenos tells us how he found the mercy of God by crying unto the Lord for many things and then being heard. A number of words come up over and over again in this very tightly woven refrain. Zenos uses 43 words once and only once in this poem, but when he wants to emphasize a few words, he uses them repeatedly.

The words “afflictions” and “Son” appear 2x, the latter curing the former.

The words “because,” “enemies,” “prayer,” and “turned” are each used 3x, achieving antithetical balance.

“O God,” “cry” (past, present, and future), “hear” and “heard” each appear 4x, and “merciful” predominates 6x, all affirming that God will always be there with mercy whenever we cry in prayer unto Him wherever we may be.

“I,” “my,” “me” and “mine” appear a total of 33x, while “thou,” “thee,” “thy” and “thine” appear 30x, conveying the need for an even match. Worship is not all about me, and it is not all about the Lord. It is a bringing together of us individually with the one true Lord (O Lord is used only once in Zenos’s expression of gratitude for havng heard mercy). This was one of the most important messages that Alma would have wanted these Zoramites to hear and understand.

Written probably long before 600 BC, and preserved on the Plates of Brass, Zenos’s plaintive but jubilant cry features several archaic qualities. Zenos’s poem is a classic. It is very beautiful poetry judged by ancient standards.

The overall thought flows progressively from the most remote wilderness, through Zenos’s field and into his house, and then into his most intimate closet. It then moves, in reverse, from the personal domestic setting of children, to the public assembly, and back out to the condition of being cast out into the wilderness where the poem began. Everything here affirms that a person can pray in the wilderness or wherever need be, and all because of God’s Son, no circumstance is beyond the joy of hearing mercy.

### Hearing Mercy

Thou art merciful, O God,  
for thou hast heard my prayer,

even when I was in the wilderness;  
Yea, thou wast merciful,  
when I prayed concerning those who were mine enemies,  
and thou didst turn them to me.

Yea, O God, thou wast merciful unto me  
when I did cry unto thee in my field;  
When I did cry unto thee in my prayer,  
and thou didst hear me.

And again, O God, when I did turn to my house,  
thou didst hear me in my prayer.  
And when I did turn unto my closet, O Lord,  
and prayed unto thee, thou didst hear me.

Yea, thou art merciful unto thy children  
when they cry unto thee  
to be heard of thee and not of men,  
and thou wilt hear them.

Yea, O God, thou hast been merciful unto me,  
and heard my cries in the midst of thy congregations.  
Yea, thou hast also heard me when I have been cast out  
and have been despised by mine enemies;

Yea, thou didst hear my cries,  
and wast angry with mine enemies,  
and thou didst visit them in thine anger  
with speedy destruction.

And thou didst hear me  
because of mine afflictions and mine sincerity;  
And it is because of thy Son  
that thou hast been thus merciful unto me,

Therefore, I will cry unto thee in all mine afflictions,  
for in thee is my joy;  
for thou hast turned thy judgments away from me,  
because of thy Son.

### Further Reading

John W. Welch, ed., "Hearing Mercy," *BYU Studies*, 33 no. 1 (Winter 1991).

### Alma 33:3–11 — When Did Zenos Live?

There is little evidence for when Zenos lived, but it appears to me that he is writing at a time when the temple in Jerusalem had become corrupted. The time of Solomon may be a bit early for dating Zenos, because the Book of Mormon tells us that all prophets knew of the prophecies that Zenos taught, and Isaiah made similar prophecies in the eighth century BC, so it's possible that Zenos and Zenock lived during that century too.

According to this prayer, Zenos had a difficult time prophesying, speaking, or preaching. He was apparently expelled. He had enemies, and he was evicted from assemblies, probably the many bodies in Jerusalem as well as local councils—rather like the poor in Antionum had been. Zenos's contemporaries were treating him as an "enemy." Moreover, it's likely that some of the people who were his enemies would not have wanted his words to survive. Fortunately, a copy survived on the brass plates.

One gets the impression that one of the reasons that Zenos was cast out of the midst of the congregations was because he understood and spoke of the concept of the Son of God who was to come. He also expressed that it was because of his belief in Christ—in other words, his faith in what Alma would call *the word*—that Zenos's prayers were answered.

### Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "What are the Roots of Zenos's Allegory in the Ancient World? (Jacob 5:3)," *KnoWhy* 70 (April 4, 2016).

David Rolph Seely and John W. Welch, "Zenos and the Texts of the Old Testament," in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch, (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: FARMS and Deseret Book, 1994), 322–346.

### Alma 33:12–14 — The Reading of the Scriptures

Some people in ancient Israel had access to some books of scripture. In Mesoamerica, they typically could have written on fig bark. They would not have been able to get all the scriptures on one of those fig-bark books, so they probably had selections or portions copied onto different books. The official, complete record, from which copies were made, would have been kept in the Temple. Literacy in the ancient world was generally low. Being able to read and write was a professional skill in most ancient societies.

Under the Law of Moses, at the Feast of Tabernacles each year, and with the special emphasis on the seventh year, the leaders would read the law aloud to everyone. While

the average person may not have been able to read, they would have at least heard the law repeated periodically. They may also have had a reading cycle. In Jewish worship, they go through the entire Old Testament week by week throughout the year, and then the next year they would go through it again. There may have been a liturgical cycle of that nature.

Because literacy in the ancient world was low, there was a very strong oral tradition. People learned how to memorize and quote texts precisely, as we see Alma doing in this chapter. A young boy preparing to become a man—to go through his *bar mitzvah* or whatever their equivalent would have been—would likely have had to memorize and know scriptures by heart. They may not have had much access to written copies, but they certainly had access verbally, and were able to repeat these things, as we see Alma doing here.

### Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Did Book of Mormon Prophets Quote Long Passages of Scripture? \(1 Nephi 19:22\)](#),” *KnoWhy* 473 (October 4, 2018).

Brant A. Gardner, “[Literacy and Orality in the Book of Mormon](#),” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 9 (2014): 29–85.

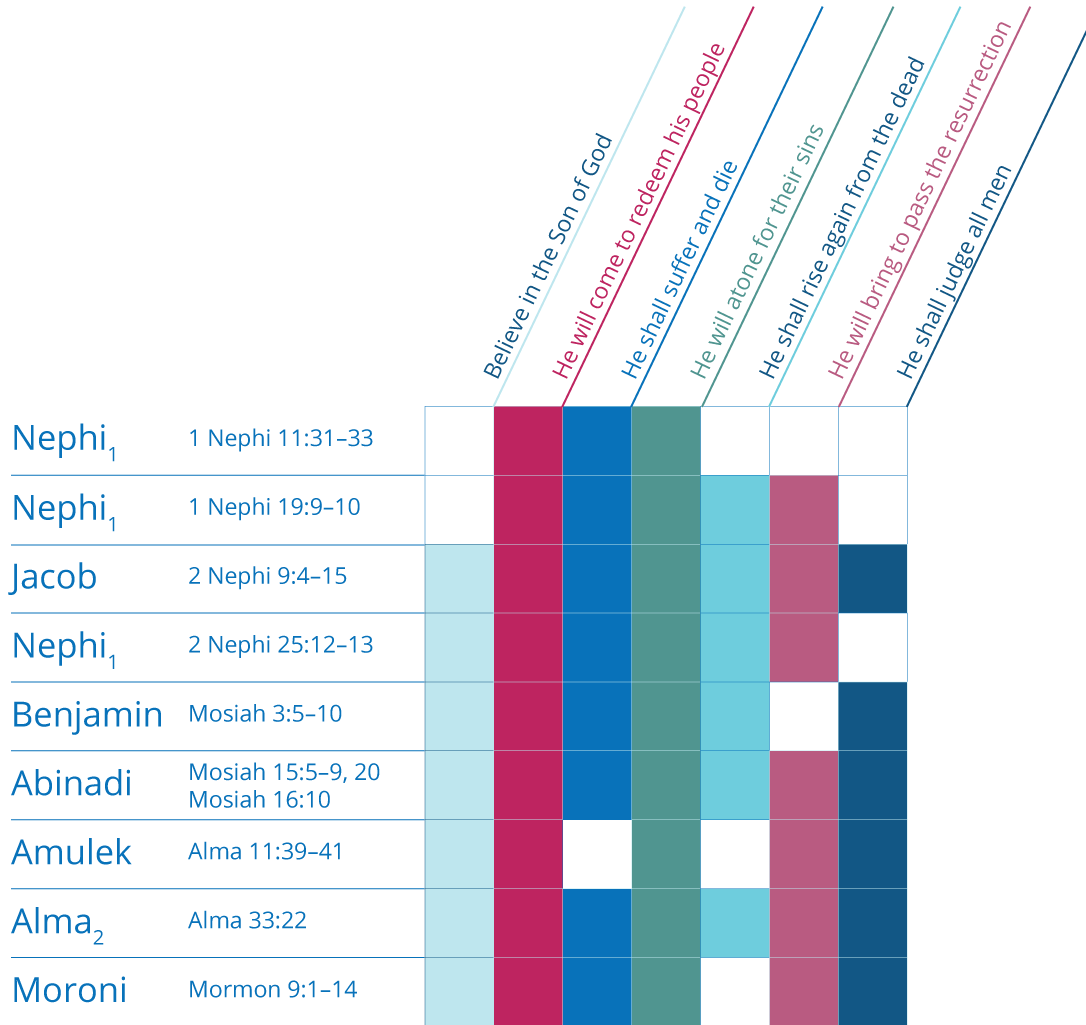
### Alma 33:22–23 — The Nephite Articles of Faith

In these verses, Alma told the poor Zoramites exactly seven things they needed to believe:

1. Believe in the Son of God,
2. That he will come to redeem his people.
3. That he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins.
4. That he shall rise again from the dead.
5. That he will bring about the general resurrection.
6. So that all men can stand before him.
7. That they will be judged at the last judgment day according to their works.

Precisely we are told that the Zoramites did not believe in a Messiah: “there shall be no Christ” (31:16). This is one of the main things that they had rejected. Nor did they believe that they needed atonement for their sins. Again, that was something that their doctrine rejected. Their belief was, “We are a chosen and a holy people” (31:18). In contrast, Alma gives the Zoramite poor the most complete and concise statement of the traditional expression of belief that began with Nephi and was variously stated by Jacob, Benjamin, and Abinadi. Alma had apparently taught this list to Amulek who used it in Ammonihah (see Alma 11:39–41).

# Consistent Elements in Nephite Declarations of Faith



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Figure 2 Adapted from John W. Welch and Greg Welch, “Consistent Elements in Nephite Declarations of Faith,” in *Charting the Book of Mormon*, chart 43.

Apparently, this had become something of what we might call the Nephite “articles of faith.” We actually see variations of this very list nine times in the Book of Mormon (Figure

2). Awareness and use of “this word” continued down to the time of Moroni after the final destruction of the Nephites (see Mormon 9:1–14).

### Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, [“What Are the Nephite Articles of Faith? \(Alma 33:22\),”](#) *KnoWhy* 141 (July 12, 2016).

### Alma 33:22–23 — Plant the Whole Seed

The whole text of verse 22 is referred to as the seed, *the word* that we must plant. We do not just plant belief in the Son of God. One must also believe that he will come to redeem his people. The people in Antionum had rejected that doctrine. Another part of the seed is also that he will “rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection, that all men shall stand before him, to be judged at the last and judgment day, according to their works.” The whole expression is the seed.

If we plant that whole seed and believe all of those elements—how the atonement will work, why it will work, what we need to do, and what will happen, and how we will be held accountable—all of those principles together will grow up in you to produce the tree of eternal life. All of that is necessary. The gospel is not a cafeteria plan where we can pick and choose the parts that appeal to us.

As Alma and Amulek discovered, most of the things that the people in the City of Antionum had come to believe were contrary to those elements of basic Nephite beliefs. They had turned away from those observances, practices, and beliefs. Thus, Alma’s final plea was for them to plant this seed so that they could have eternal life as well as the earthly reward that follows, “Then may God grant unto you that your burdens may be light, through the joy of his Son” (33:23).

### Alma 33:23 — Their Burdens Will be Made Light

The class system was foundational to the Zoramites because their economy needed to exploit the labor of the poor. Again, we see that part of Alma’s skill lies in relating closely to his audience and recognizing their difficulties. We know that they had been required to labor with little pay, as they complain in 32:5, at the beginning of Alma’s word: “They have cast us out of our synagogues which we have labored abundantly to build with our own hands; and they have cast us out because of our exceeding poverty.” Not unintentionally, at the very end of his words, Alma thus promised these poor people that those very burdens would be lightened.

Perhaps Alma was also echoing back to the time when his own father had been under captivity by the Lamanites, and they were laden with heavy burdens. They prayed and were faithful, and the burdens were made light (Mosiah 24:15). It is very interesting that



Alma promised these people the same blessing that his father had experienced. Alma may have been a young boy when that happened, but it was certainly part of his family memory, and he would have personally understood the burdens that these poor people were being placed under by their own Zoramite people.

### Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, “[How Does the Lord Make our Burdens Light? \(Mosiah 24:15\)](#),” *KnoWhy* 102 (March 18, 2016).

## Alma 34

### Alma 34:4–8 — Amulek’s Testimony of *the Word*

Amulek then arose to add his testimony to that of Alma’s. He picked up where Alma had ended, by talking about *the word*. He wanted the people to have so much faith that they could plant the word in their hearts. Here, Amulek was standing as a second witness, but as Amulek usually did, he developed the idea a little further. In the following verses, he also called upon the words of Zenos who preached of the redemption that would come through the Son of God.

Amulek’s validating and further expounding of Alma’s testimony is a good example for missionaries. Even today, when one missionary teaches and testifies, the other missionary testifies to the truth of what was just taught. In this case, it was almost as though Alma gave the first missionary discussion, and Amulek gave the second, taking the principles ever further. Take the topic of faith for example. Alma taught the people to plant the seed, nourish it, let it grow, and it will bear fruit. Amulek took it even further and emphasized faith unto repentance. He also taught them to not procrastinate their repentance, so that they would have faith in the day of judgment, when they would stand before God to be judged.

### Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, “[What Role Does the Book of Mormon Play in Missionary Work? \(2 Nephi 30:3\)](#),” *KnoWhy* 288 (March 17, 2017).

### Alma 34:9–16 — The Atonement Explained

Amulek added much more detail to the news about Christ’s Atonement than Alma had covered. Alma had condensed what they needed to have faith in. Now Amulek expanded it. He clarified why there must be an atonement made, tying it clearly to the Fall, and highlighting its purpose to save man from perishing in their fallen state. He referred twice (v. 10 and 13) to the fact that it must be a great and last sacrifice, greater than any man

could perform, greater than the sacrifices offered in the law of Moses. At the end of verse 10, he then adds that it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice.

### **Alma 34:10, 14 — An Infinite and Eternal Sacrifice**

A concept that arose in some reading I have been doing about baptism applies just as well here to the doctrine of atonement. In Jewish ritual, they performed ritual purifications by immersing in a font called a *mikvah*. The Israelite priest cleansed himself each time before officiating every Sabbath, and at the seasonal festivals. For us, baptism happens only once. We are buried in the water once, and we belong to Jesus Christ. At baptism, we make covenants once and for all, and now belong to his family. Accordingly, Amulek taught that while their priests were making many sacrifices, repeated washings, and covenant renewals, when Christ comes, there will be one infinite sacrifice to cover everything.

In what ways is the Atonement infinite? The Atonement is of a *divine nature*. It was *made by an infinite being* who redeems his people. God is an infinite being, infinite in the sense of being eternal and being immortal. The Atonement is made by a being who is more than human.

It also is infinite in the sense that it has *universal application*. First of all, the Fall is overcome, and as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive, and that is universal.

The Atonement also cures death, which was caused by the Fall of Adam. In addition to death, sin, imperfection, corruption, and work also came into the world when Adam and Eve fell. The state of existence in the Garden of Eden was at a higher degree of glory than the one that we enjoy now. Whatever changes came about by the fall of the first Adam will be fully corrected. The extent of the Atonement is complete and infinite in that regard as well.

It is also infinite in *magnitude, coverage, and potential*. The word *potent* means *powerful*. So, it is really also infinite in terms of potency and power. It is infinite in *coverage*. It applies not only to every person that has lived or ever will live on this earth, but countless earths like this. Through Christ, all can become begotten sons and daughters unto God. That is why it can be the great and last, because it is sufficient and necessary to atone for all breaches of trust and relationship between deity and us.

It is infinite in its *applicability to all*. Everyone will be resurrected.

Regarding sin, the Atonement is also potentially infinite in scope, but its application depends upon repentance. It is like having an infinite amount of money in your bank account, but you still have to go and present your I.D. to draw the money out. You have

to do something to make it applicable to you. However, that account is never going to run out. There will never be a lack of funds.

It transcends all boundaries of *time and space*. The Relief Society motto says, “We are beloved spirit daughters of God and our lives have meaning, purpose and direction.”

It is infinite in *mercy*, and also *love*.

It was infinite in terms of *suffering*. Jesus took upon him all of the sins and burdens and bled from every pore

It was infinite in terms of *willingness*. There was nothing that the Atonement was not willing to cover. It was *voluntary* in every respect. Jesus said, “Not my will, but thine, Father be done.”

And in *obedience*, with no reservations of any kind.

The Atonement is really in a different realm of existence than this secular world. It is in a spiritual realm. It can take us out of this world; it can cure the problems that we have in this world; it can overcome the sins that we have created. There is something beyond this physical, finite, temporal world— that is why we call it *temporal*, because it is *temporary*. It is of a non-infinite nature. The concept of a boundary or a set with limitations necessarily implies that the set is incomplete and that something exists beyond it.

The Atonement is infinite in *time*. It answered all the demands of justice with no claims to be made about when that act was performed.

The Atonement, then, is also *perfect* in its function. In Alma 7:11–12, it says that he will take upon him death, “that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people and he will take upon him their infirmities.” He will suffer pains, afflictions, temptations of every kind that he may take upon himself all of these to meet all of the demands. In Alma 7:9 we read, “It is expedient that an atonement should be made for according to the great plan of the eternal God there must be an atonement made.” Amulek likewise says in Alma 34 that this is according to the eternal plan. It is eternal in the sense that it was laid down before the creation of this world, which means it is coming to us from an eternal sphere; it is infinite in origin, being a part of God’s eternal plan.

We love to use allegories to try to describe what is happening in the atonement process. For example, we tell about a bully in school who steps forward to take the beating for some child who has been mistreated. And again, there is another story about a person who has fallen into the ice on a frozen lake and a rope is thrown out and they grab on to the rope and hold on to it so they can be pulled out. There are stories like *The Touch of the*

*Master's Hand*, in which we have an old, battered violin and nobody thinks it is worth anything, but the influence of the master's hand made the violin much more than the people thought it was worth. What is our worth? It is not much unless the master touches us.

All these metaphors are good, but they are all incomplete. They each describe one different aspect of the whole atonement process, but I do not think any analogy can accurately encapsulate the entirety of the Atonement. We might even say that the Atonement is infinitely infinite. It is infinite in every way possible. Nothing else is like it completely.

### Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "Why Must There be an Infinite and Eternal Sacrifice? (Alma 34:12)," *KnoWhy* 142 (July 13, 2016).

Tad Callister, *The Infinite Atonement*, (Provo, UT, Deseret Book Co. 2000).

### Alma 34:9–16 — Amulek's Figure of Speech Conveys the Atonement

There is a certain Jubilee metaphor in Amulek's words. At the Jubilee celebration, every fifty years, debts were excused, people who had sold themselves into slavery for debt were freed, and lands of inheritance were returned to their owners, at least, that was what the Mosaic law expected (see Leviticus chapter 25 for details.) Just as the Jubilee redeemed all of these debts that are owed, Jesus will redeem all mankind, on the one condition of repentance and obedience, and none of our sins will count against us anymore. Imagine the poor people from Antionum being told by Alma and Amulek that the redemption will take care of all of the spiritual debts and sins.

As far as figures of speech are concerned, there is an interesting eight-element chiasm in Alma 34:9:

- A For **it is expedient**
- B that an **atonement** should be made; for according to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an **atonement** made,
- C or else all mankind **must** unavoidably **perish**;
- D **yea, all are hardened**;
- D **yea, all are fallen and are lost**,
- C and **must perish**
- B except it be through the **atonement**
- A which **it is expedient** should be made.

Why did Amulek express the idea of the atonement using this chiasmic figure of speech? The answer may be that a chiasm starts at one place, and goes to a center, where it turns around and comes back to where it started. A chiasm thus adds a sense of completion and integrated wholeness. Since the word *atone* etymologically means to make “*at one*,” there always is a kind of reunion and a reunifying that the Atonement brings about. In a literary sense, a chiasm unifies the words expressing a thought in much the same way that the feeling of atonement gives you, namely the sense of reunion with God after the transgression, after the sin, and then after being encircled.

Christ taught the people on the earth through parables. He knew that some people would understand some aspects of some of the parables, and others would understand other things. We have to keep looking and striving to understand the one great wholeness to all truth.

The ancient Egyptians dwelt on the focal point of how we will all be judged in the final judgment according to our works. In the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, all the deceased are brought before the judgment throne of the god Osiris. Before approaching the god, the deceased had to have their heart weighed on a set of scales against the weight of the feather of truth. If your heart was lighter than the feather, it went up, and all was well. But if your heart was heavy and hard, if you were found to be a hard-hearted person, your heart's side of the scale would go down. If the heart was found unworthy, the jaws of the death monster, the crocodile, would be waiting beneath to eat the descending heart.

In verse 11, Amulek used image of logic to appeal to the minds of the Zoramites, who apparently agreed with one point of the law, namely that if you kill someone, you must be killed. You could not buy your way out of a homicide; and if a person killed someone, the dead person's relatives had the obligation to avenge his death. If someone had committed a murder and was about to die for it, there was no way that someone else could substitute for the perpetrator. The person who killed had to be punished. It was non-delegable and there was no other way out of it.

Amulek raises this very point using their law as a metaphor: “Now there is not any man that can sacrifice his own blood which will atone for the sins of another. If a man murdereth, behold will our law, which is just, take the life of his brother? No.” (Alma 34:11–12). The law required the life of him that murdered. Therefore, Amulek taught, there can be nothing that is short of a divine and infinite atonement that will suffice, because if Christ were only a man, then his death, as a man, could not count for our transgressions. We can see the logic of it even if we might disagree with it, since today if a man murders, we do not in all states require the capital death penalty. But the point still has force and effect. Many things we do cannot be repaired. Restitution is not always possible. Therefore, nothing short of divine help, beyond our limited human powers and

resources, can fix all the damage that can be done. It is always easier to tear down than to build up.

### **Alma 34:17–27 — Amulek Teaches to Pray Always**

We know that the Zoramites left Zarahemla because, among other things, they were not willing to observe the performances of the church of praying daily to avoid entering into temptation. The Zoramites were praying only once a week (Alma 31:10, 12).

Thus, building on what Alma had taught about prayer in Alma 33, Amulek taught in this chapter that people must indeed pray morning, noon and night. The invitation and mandate to pray to God in the Temple was sung countless times in the Psalms. David set the orthodox example by praying and crying aloud “evening, and morning, and at noon” (Psalms 55:17), as Amulek also insisted. In Jerusalem, the Shofar would blow at the times designated for daily prayer as well as on the full moon, the new moon, and on feast days (Psalms 81:3). The Zoramites objected to that. Alma and Amulek wanted to be sure that their unobservant behavior was counteracted. They taught their people to pray constantly so that guidance and revelation could continue to be given throughout their daily lives.

### **Alma 34:18–25 — Amulek’s Poetic Writing on Prayer**

Continuing his comments on prayer, Amulek composed eight simple lines of poetic language that appear in Alma 34:18–25:

Yea cry unto him for mercy, for he is mighty to save ...  
 Cry unto him when ye are in your fields, yea, over all your flocks

Cry unto him in your houses,  
 Yea, over all your household, both morning, mid-day, and evening.

Yea, cry unto him against the power of your enemies.  
 Yea, cry unto him against the devil, who is an enemy to all righteousness.

Cry unto him over the crops of your fields, that ye may prosper in them.  
 Cry over the flocks of your fields, that they may increase.

These lines are not nearly as eloquent as Zenos’s longer poetic masterpiece. But Amulek may have wanted to reach a simpler audience. The poor, although spiritually wiser, may not have been as linguistically sophisticated as the upperclass Zoramites. Here we see eight short lines written in alternating couplets. In Hebrew poetry, you will often have a parallelistic format of some kind, either as antithetical parallelisms or as synthetic parallelisms. Here we have synthetic parallelisms (bringing together the time and place of prayer; or equating flocks and fields, houses and households, or crops and flocks), synonymous parallelisms (equating human enemies with the enemy of all righteousness),

and antithetical parallelisms (juxtaposing the Lord’s mercy and salvific might against the devil’s presumptuous preemptive power).

Instead of just seeing these lines as four couplets (four pairs of two lines each), we can see this as two pairs of two couplets (each of which begins with *yea, cry, cry, yea*; and then *yea, yea, cry, cry*), which are themselves paired. In effect, we have here eight lines constructed as an overall pair of four pairs, each of a pair of lines, in other words a pair of pairs of pairs. This is an exceptional example of parallelistic writing. The center point of this parallelism is the singular point that we should cry unto the Lord “both morning, mid-day, and evening,” one of the big issues for the Zoramites.

We do not know whether Amulek wrote this poem himself. Whether he did so or was inspired merely to quote it at this juncture, it is very impressive. He may have been imitating Zenos or even quoting from an otherwise unknown text of Zenos, since this poem is similar to Zenos’ poetry quoted in Alma 33 and even adds the admonition to pray in your closets or closed rooms, in your secret places, and even in the wilderness, as did Zenos (as discussed above). Meaningfully, Amulek’s eight lines use the imperative *cry* the significant number of 7 times.

#### **Alma 34:18–41 — Amulek’s Conclusion**

In his final remarks, Amulek circles back around to the second and first points made by Alma at the beginning of their instruction, namely (2) bringing forth fruit unto repentance and righteousness (34:30–36); and (1) humbling yourself, worshipping God patiently in whatever place you may be (34:38), even if you are afflicted and cast out (34:39–41).

Amulek added to the point about the fruits of repentance the need to be charitable (34:28–29), and the urgent need to not delay repentance (34:30–36). Some people wonder about Amulek’s statement that there is no time for repentance “after this day of life” ends and the “night of darkness” comes (34:33). But that “awful crisis” would seem to refer to when the unrepentant resurrected being stands before God to be judged (33:22), and not to the time when the spirit moves into the spirit world (34:34). Thus, the “space between death and the resurrection of the body” (Alma 40:21) would seem to be included in the full time mercifully granted by God as the probationary time in which “to repent” and deny the devil the ultimate power to “seal you his” (42:4–5).

On humbling oneself, Amulek adds the need to “live in thanksgiving daily,” to be “watchful unto prayer continually,” and to “not revile against” those who treat you badly (34:37–41). Amulek knows personally what it means to be treated badly by people you know and thought were your friends and neighbors. The best antidotes for the poison of seeking revenge is feeling grateful, counting your blessings, and praying continually for your enemies and also for yourself.

## Alma 35

This chapter shows that while Alma may have won the skirmish against the Zoramites, thereby destroying their “craft” (35:3), they may have lost the larger battle. The Ammonites take in the Zoramite refugees (35:9), but then the Ammonites are forced to leave their land in Jershon to go to Melek (35:13). Meanwhile, the Nephites prepared the land of Jershon as a battleground, arming the poor Zoramites to be able to defend the lands there that had now been given to them “for their inheritance” (35:14), as the Lamanites and the Zoramites entered into an alliance (35:11). This was a high price to pay, and at home the Nephites became “offended because of the strictness” of the word and the law (35:15) that had to be enforced as the Nephites braced themselves for what would become seven years of prolonged military conflict. The realities of *real politik* are always stifling.

### **Alma 35:16 — Alma Taught His Sons Individually**

Finally, Amulek’s teaching about the atonement in chapter 34 aligns beautifully with Alma’s bringing his sons together to teach them at the end of this block of chapters. They had been with Alma on the mission to Antionum. They had seen some amazing success. As a very conscientious father, he did not neglect his sons.

Typical of Alma’s public preaching but now in more detail, he spoke to his sons about his own conversion and then historically, how the Lord had surely delivered them from bondage and captivity. He testified that he knew that, through the Atonement, the Lord would deliver all who would cry to Him for salvation and redemption and would choose to repent and serve Him in wisdom, patience, justice, and mercy. He assured them that they would overcome death and be lifted up at the last day, a serious concern that that generation would have had as the engines of war were again revving up their weapons of destruction and death.

As we think about Christ’s Atonement, we too can take reassurance in the knowledge that the Lord has risen and overcome death. Where would we be without that knowledge? How blessed we are to have His influence, His eternal wisdom and infinite power to make us something completely better than we could ever possibly be by ourselves, and without which we would be, of all men, most miserable.

Alma gave each his sons a personal charge, “separately, concerning the things pertaining to righteousness.” In these patriarchal blessings and high priestly promises, he also gave to each of them personal “commandments,” which we are fortunate to have, coming up next in Alma 36–42, and particularly to know that they are the very words of Alma “according to his own record” (35:16).