

ALMA 39–42

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Alma 39–42 — Alma Uses a Different Pattern of Speech for Corianton

When Alma spoke to Helaman and Shiblon, he used wonderful expressions, aphorisms, and wisdom statements that are meaningful even when they stand alone. When Alma addressed Corianton, the density of the wisdom literature is not as great here, partly because the pearls are scattered among many other things that Alma needed and chose to address. There are enough wisdom sayings to see that these chapters were written by the same Alma, but he was having to use a much different style because of Corianton's very different and crucial needs.

Thus, as you read, notice the number of times Alma makes strong, personal declarations, uses imperatives, asks blunt rhetorical questions, and poses bold statements of incontrovertible axioms of truth. We will do well to ponder each one of these propositions and consider how they might apply to our lives, as much as they applied to Corianton's. For example,

- "I would not dwell upon your crimes to harrow up your soul if it were not for your good" (39:7)
- "Ye cannot hide your crimes from God" (39:8)
- "Seek not after riches nor the vain things of this world, for behold, you cannot carry them with you" (39:14)
- "Time only is measured unto men" (40:8)
- "No unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of God" (40:26)
- "If their works were good in this life, and the desires of their hearts were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good. And if their works are evil they shall be restored unto them for evil." (41:3)
- "The decrees of God are unalterable" (41:8)

- “Do not risk one more offense against your God upon those points of doctrine, which ye have hitherto risked to commit sin” (41:9)
- “It was not expedient that man should be reclaimed from this temporal death, for that would destroy the great plan of happiness” (42:8)
- “Except it were for these conditions of repentance in this probationary state, mercy could not take effect except it destroy the work of justice” (42:13)
- “But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted” (42:22)
- “...God would cease to be God” (42:13, 22, 25)
- “Do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice?” (42:25)
- “Only let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance” (42:29)
- Do not endeavor to excuse yourself in the least point because of your sins” (42:30)

In addition, although we need to read between the lines in these four chapters, it is not difficult to detect what Corianton’s doctrinal questions and religious problems were. Many of these problems came straight out of the complaint-book of Nehor and Korihor. For instance:

- Corianton apparently believed that forgiveness for sin was easy to obtain (39:6)
- He thought he could hide his crimes from God (39:9)
- He was not at ease with the idea of knowing future things before they actually happened (39:17)
- He was worried about the resurrection of the dead (40:1)
- He wondered why no one had been resurrected yet (40:2)
- He saw it as a problem that all people could be resurrected at the same time (40:17)
- He probably doubted the physical nature of the resurrection (40:24)
- He twisted and wrested the meaning of the word “restoration” (41:1, 15)
- He did not see how a just God could or would punish sinners (42:1), and
- He flatly denied the justice of God (42:30)

As you read, pay attention to the many ways that Alma rebutted and corrected these persistent errors, adapting his previous public answers to these questions to now suit the individual needs of his youngest son Corianton. Notice how delicately he uses sincere pleading, testimony, scriptures, words of the prophets, linguistics, air-tight logic, commandments, and humble admissions that he does not know it all.

Ultimately, Alma chose, in effect, to correct Corianton by focusing on the last two of the seven elements in what he had called the “Word” in Alma 33:23, which he said that all people should “plant ... in your hearts.” Those two final elements were that the Lord Jesus

shall “bring to pass the resurrection” and that “all men shall stand before [God] to be judged at the last and judgment day, according to their works” (33:22). Alma focused here on the doctrines of the resurrection in chapter 40 and on the doctrines of the judgment in chapters 41–42.

As you individually or with your family read the ninety-one verses in this very tightly woven and maturely sophisticated text, consider carefully how all of Alma’s profound words address our needs today, both in general for Latter-day Saints as a people and also to you and your family in particular:

Which of Corianton’s problems are still with or around us today? How do Alma’s responses still offer compelling and satisfying answers?

What has helped you personally to recognize the seriousness of sin and to inspire someone else on the path of turning away through repentance?

How can you help your family members increase their faith in the principle of resurrection and in the reality of the world to come?

How can one spiritually internalize more deeply the very core of Alma’s explanation that God can be, and indeed must be, both just and merciful?

Alma 39

Alma 39:2–4 — Corianton Followed the Harlot Isabel

Corianton’s story may well capture your attention as it has captured the imagination of many writers, dramatists, and artists, including the famous Book of Mormon painter Minerva Teichert. She once painted a small Corianton scene on 18” x 12” sketchbook-sized paper. Until recently, it was unknown to art collectors, but it came on the market and was purchased not long ago by a private buyer who has shared it generously in *BYU Studies*. The sketch likely dates to around 1949–1951. Even members of the Minerva Teichert family had never seen or known of it. [I am happy to show it here](#) (Figure 1).

The scene depicts Corianton with someone, presumably his brother Shiblon, trying to pull him back, while he is being lured by Isabel, who is in the middle with her dancing friends in the background. The painting did not have a name, but when we published it in *BYU Studies*, I gave it the name of *Isabel’s Seduction of Corianton*.

The painting, is clearly based on Alma 39:3–4,

Thou didst do that which was grievous unto me for thou didst forsake the ministry and did go over into the land of Siron among the borders of the Lamanites after

the harlot Isabel. Yea she did steal away the hearts of many, but this was no excuse for thee, my son.



Figure 1 *The Seduction of Corianton* by Minerva Teichert.

The painting was owned by an old Wyoming rancher, to whom Minerva had given it when he lived across the street from her when he was only about 10 years old. He was not a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but according to his story, Minerva may have thought that it would help him to resist temptation someday or might interest him in the Book of Mormon.

The story of Corianton had long been very popular, and beginning in 1889, B. H. Roberts, who was 32 years old at the time, ran a series of articles about the Corianton story in the *Contributor*, an old magazine that was run by the Sunday School program. The stories started with Alma 31 and the mission to Antionum. Roberts wrote of all the problems that were involved, the conversion needed there, and how Alma surely needed Corianton's help in trying to correct the problems of the Zoramites. But Corianton was evidently influenced by some of the people he was trying to convert. The series ended with Corianton's repentance, and was very a dramatic, fictionalized expansion of the story.

Shortly after that, playwright Orestes U. Bean turned it into a dramatic script, and in 1902 it was performed in the Salt Lake Theater to some acclaim. Twenty years later, Lester and Byron Park helped Bean turn it into a film, but it did not meet with much success.

In 1902, the young Minerva Teichert was taken to the stage production of *Corianton* by her art teacher, and she wrote in her diary how impressed she was. Elements in the script for the stage play and also in the content of B. H. Roberts' series are detectable in the painting. It was her way of conveying that story in paint.

The story of Corianton is compelling perhaps because it does not go into the details. It can represent many kinds of serious transgressions that we encounter in our own lives or are asked to help with in our ministering to others. Whether we are Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, ministering brothers or sisters, or a bishop, we can emulate Alma's example of kindness directness in helping his son come to the point of repentance.

Further Reading

Herman du Toit "[Minerva Teichert's The Seduction of Corianton](#)," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54, No. 2 (2015): 162–165.

Alma 39:5–9 — Corianton's Sins Were Serious

Alma did not shy away from acknowledging the severity of Corianton's sins in Alma 39:5. And from 39:6, it appears that Corianton believed it to be easy to obtain forgiveness for sin, but Alma admonished him: "Yea, I say unto you my son, it is not easy for [a person who knowingly transgresses against the light and knowledge of God] to obtain forgiveness." It sounds as though Corianton had tried to excuse himself and to dismiss his awful transgressions by downplaying their severity. Alma taught that these are very serious transgressions, and warned, "Behold, ye cannot hide your crimes from God." This statement only makes sense if Corianton had been under the impression that he could hide his sins from God. Alma followed that by making his point clear, "Now my son I would that ye should repent and forsake your sins, and go no more after the lusts of your eyes" (Alma 39:9), still referring to Corianton as "my son," in a kindly manner.

In Ammonihah, in Alma 12–13, Alma fought for his *own* life. Here, however, he is fighting for his *son's* life. There is a greater feeling of love and concern, and a real desire to be very clear in a way that was harder when Alma was addressing a whole nation, as in Alma 5, when he could not be quite as specific as he was with Corianton. This guidance for Corianton was likely given toward the end of Alma's life, as this is the last thing heard from him. It is almost as if he saved the best for last. He may have realized that this was his last chance, and decided to give Corianton all he could. Last words, or last testimonies, tend to have something special about them, such as King Benjamin's last testimony or

Elder Bruce R. McConkie's final testimony. Alma did not indicate that he was going to be gone, but it may be that some such intuition intensified his text.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Was Corianton's Sin So Serious? \(Alma 39:5\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 147 (July 20, 2016). "In effect, Corianton metaphorically 'murdered' the testimonies of those he was commissioned to bring unto Christ when he was lured away by Isabel."

Book of Mormon Central, "[What Does Alma Say about Avoiding Sexual Sin? \(Alma 39:9\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 326, (June 14, 2017).

Alma 39:11 — When They Saw Your Conduct, They Would Not Believe in My Words.

Alma was distressed not only because of the eternal danger in which Corianton had placed himself, but for those who saw his example and failed to accept the gospel because of it. This is a good example of the principle that sometimes our choices can have very far-reaching consequences. The impact of Alma's son Corianton on the Zoramites is a good example of this principle. One may well wonder, where does my right to do what I want end and my duty to not injure others begin? Although popular philosophy often discounts, if not ignores, the moral imperatives of our duties to other people, the concept of duty is given priority by the Golden Rule and the second great commandment, to love others as we love ourselves, and to do unto others as we would want other people to do unto us.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "[What Impact Do My Actions Have on Others? \(Alma 39:11\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 390 (December 14, 2017). "Sometimes, we may try to rationalize our sins by thinking 'I'm not hurting anyone else.' But before we do this, we would do well to think about the wide-reaching effects of Corianton's sin, and consider the impact our sins might have on others."

Alma 39:17 — Would Christ Would Really Come?

Alma did not explicitly say what Corianton was upset about in this regard, but it appears that Corianton was preoccupied with some of the fundamental truth-claims of the Gospel. How could he know that Christ would come so long before Christ actually came? How could he know that there will be a resurrection? These were common questions in the Book of Mormon before the first coming of Christ. They are still pressing questions as the world awaits the Second Coming.

If people reject the coming of the Savior, or do not believe in resurrection, then a corollary is that sin is not a serious matter. In 2 Nephi, that same point had been raised. Some people believed in the resurrection of the dead, but the issue was contested frequently, even among the Nephites. For example, in Mosiah 26:1, we are told that the rising generation “could not understand the words of king Benjamin, being little children at the time he spake unto his people,” and in Mosiah 26:2, “they did not believe what had been said concerning the resurrection of the dead.” That was the generation that Alma the Younger had been a part of. One of the concerns that Alma the Younger had was that an increasing number did not believe in the resurrection. Likewise, in Alma 30, Korihor did not see how a just God could punish a sinner. Nehor also argued that God would not punish people and that everyone should be saved.

If we look back over the previous chapters in the book of Alma and examine all of Corianton’s problems, the same undercurrents of argument kept arising. We might have thought that Korihor had been put to rest when he was convicted, smitten, and trampled. However, the last place he went to was the city of Antionum. That is where Corianton had served a mission, so maybe he had encountered some of those ideas among the Zoramites. Korihor had been quite successful in the city of Zarahemla; Nehor also had many followers.

These were clearly not new arguments. Alma had heard them before, and he gave us very carefully thought-out answers to each of these questions. Sometimes, he just rebutted them with his testimony; at other times he quoted scripture. When he taught about the resurrection and how the body would be raised to a perfect form, he quoted his missionary companion, Amulek. In Alma 10 and again in Alma 34, Amulek taught the same doctrines. Here in Alma’s teaching of Corianton, these principles were brought together and crystallized.

Alma 40

Alma 40:6–9 — Time Is Measured Only unto Men

Alma taught about resurrection, life, and death, teaching specifically about a time and “space” being allowed between death and the resurrection. In this chapter, in which he said, “Time only is measured unto men” (Alma 40:9), he explained that we measure our lives by our time on the earth. God does not. He sees the whole picture. In that sense, God is not subject to a limitation on time. Only God knows how long our time in various stages will be, and He knows the right time for us to be resurrected as well as to die. That is the real subject matter of this chapter. God relates to time in an infinite way with infinite cognition. We can only really look at our current span.

Alma 40: 11–12 — Time in the Spirit World

Alma described what happens during this space of time between death and resurrection. After death—as Alma had learned from “an angel” after he had “inquired diligently” (40: 3, 11)—all men, “whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life” (Alma 40:11; see also 40:21). Our spirit then goes to what we commonly call “the post-mortal spirit world,” either into a state that is called paradise, “a state of rest, a state of peace,” or into another state that is called prison.

Both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young said that the spirit world is really all around us, and even the spirits who are in what we call spirit prison are not locked up. They function in some ways as we do here on earth, but many there have not yet have the required saving ordinances so that they can do all that most of them would like to do. They are not resurrected yet. The resurrection comes after our time in the spirit realm and at the appointed time for each person. To call someone forth to be resurrected is to be understood as a priesthood ordinance.

Further Reading

Brigham Young, “The Spirit World,” in Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young, chapter 38 (1997): 279.

Spencer W. Kimball, “Our Great Potential,” General Conference April 1977.

Alma 40:15–20 — Consignation to Happiness or Misery in the Spirit World

Apparently, there had been some confusion in Alma’s day about the status of spirits and the time of judgment in post-mortal life. The assignment to paradise, for example, is a judgment based our earthly lives: what ordinances we have received, how we have used our stewardship, etc. Alma refers to that as the “consignation to happiness or misery.” This, he points out, is not to be confused with the first resurrection, which refers to the time when a first group of spirits are resurrected.

Alma reinforced the idea that, although the consignation to happiness and misery is a form of preliminary judgment, that is not the same as “the first resurrection,” nor does the resurrection occur for all people at the same time. As Alma said, people do not all die at the same time (40:8), so why do they need to be resurrected at the same time? We do not know how that will happen, or when it will happen, but eventually these points of judgment will occur.

Alma 40:21–22 — When We Are Resurrected, We Will be Judged

Alma specified that after the resurrection, we will be brought to stand before God with our bodies and be judged (Alma 40:21). Before that, there will be a level of judgment that will determine where people will reside in the spirit world, but the final judgment comes

after our spirits and bodies are reunited (40:21). Thus, according to doctrine in the Book of Mormon, after resurrection, when we will stand before God to be judged, we must appear with and in our bodies. Thus, the Book of Mormon sees a need to return and report with our bodies to be judged according to the things that we have done in our bodies. For example, as Jacob said:

O how great the plan of our God! For on the other hand, the paradise of God must deliver up the spirits of the righteous, and the grave deliver up the body of the righteous; and the spirit and the body is restored to itself again, and all men become incorruptible, and immortal, and they are living souls, having a perfect knowledge like unto us in the flesh, save it be that our knowledge shall be perfect. *Wherefore, we shall have a perfect knowledge of all our guilt, and our uncleanness, and our nakedness; and the righteous shall have a perfect knowledge of their enjoyment, and their righteousness, being clothed with purity, yea, even with the robe of righteousness* (2 Nephi 9:13–14).

We will know then that the judgment given to us is just, because we will remember perfectly, both physically and spiritually, as is somehow necessary. (If we have repented, of course, we will not have a recollection of those sins and the Lord will remember them no more. This may mean that some of us may not have much to remember on that occasion, if we have repented well enough!) But, how we know and what we know must somehow be embedded in our physical makeup. In another setting, the Doctrine and Covenants similarly says that knowledge—the degree of intelligence that we have attained to in this life—will rise with us in the resurrection (130:18). This is the good news that Alma wanted Corianton to recognize. But with it comes the corresponding bad news that the same degree of darkness and error that we have attained to in this life will rise with us also, unless we have by that point in time truly repented.

Alma 40:22–26 — The Restoration Spoken by the Mouths of the Prophets

Alma's discussion of the word *restoration* highlights the consequences of our actions. Nehor spread the doctrine that God had created all men, and He would restore them to the state of purity that they had started. To the Nehorites, the word *restoration* meant that God would *return* us all to the Garden of Eden, or some paradise. Nehor thus believed that all people would be saved, and therefore sin is not an issue. Alma clarified that the full restoration, which has been spoken by the mouths of the prophets (v. 22) comes after the judgment (v. 21): "And then shall the righteous shine forth in the kingdom of God. But behold, an awful death cometh upon the wicked; for they die as to things pertaining to things of righteousness" (Alma 40:25–26). The correct understanding of the meaning of the word *restoration* is then the main topic in Alma 41.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "[Why and How Did Alma Explain the Meaning of the Word 'Restoration'? \(Alma 41:1\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 149 (July 22, 2016).

Alma 41

Alma 41:1–4, 10–15 — Not Everyone Will be Resurrected to the Same Glory

Alma continued to clarify the meaning of the word *restoration*. Because there are natural consequences to sin, when we are bad, things are unhappy in our lives. There are consequences to our family and society; and there are consequences to us individually. We cannot expect to be brought into a state of happiness if we have not cultivated a character of happiness. You cannot be given good if you have not given out good. "Wickedness never was happiness" (v. 10). The whole point that Alma is making about the resurrection is that we will be brought before God with our whole body and soul. We will be resurrected so that a just judgment can be given out, so that all of the things that we have done, both spiritually and in our body will have an effect in the judgment. Then all appropriate blessings will be restored: "For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again, and be restored; therefore, the word restoration more fully condemneth the sinner, and justifieth him not at all" (Alma 41:15). Alma was making sure that Corianton understood that the word *restoration* did not mean that his sins would be taken away and he would be restored to being perfect as he had been created. Alma wanted to make sure that his son realized that unless he repented, his sins would rise with him.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "[Why and How Did Alma Explain the Meaning of the Word 'Restoration'? \(Alma 41:1\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 149 (July 22, 2016).

Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Can Wickedness Never Bring Happiness? \(Alma 41:10\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 329 (June 21, 2017).

Alma 41:13–14 — Chiasmus for Corianton Too

There is an interesting detail in these verses. I hope you will look carefully at the word orders used by Alma in presenting this principle of restoration. In Alma 41:13, he pointed out that restoration will mean "evil for evil, carnal for carnal, devilish for devilish." Then he added the good side (the side that he wanted Corianton to take note of), this means:

- (a) good for that which is (a') good,
- (b) righteous for that which is (b') righteous,

(c) just for that which is (c') just,
and (d) mercy for that which is (d') merciful.

Then Alma applied this to Corianton's behavior, but in the reverse order: "Therefore, my son, see that ye:

are (d') merciful,
deal (c') justly,
judge (b') righteously, and
do (a') good continually.

He went through these four terms exactly again. Remember, a good chiasm needs to be well balanced. In the first sequence, we have two *goods*; and in this first reversed list, we only have one *good*, so far. But keep reading! What does Alma go on to say? "Therefore, if ye do these things, you will get your reward," and what will you get? You will have:

(d) mercy restored unto you,
(c) justice restored unto you
you will have a (b) righteous judgment restored, and
ye shall have (a) good rewarded unto you.

Very clever! First Alma went through a list of pairs, "*good for good*." The first *good* is the reward, and the second *good* is the quality a person must have to get that reward. Thus, *good* is the reward that we will get if we have the quality of being *good*. Then, after he had gone through this first "list of pairs," Alma went on to give two lists, "a pair of lists," in the opposite order. He listed the qualities he desired of Corianton in the reverse order, and then he listed the commensurate rewards that he would receive in that same reverse order. Thus, he balanced the chiasm. It is very interesting and creative how he has done this. As we have seen, Alma's blessings and commandments to Helaman in Alma 36 is a great chiasm, but here Alma constructed an equally brilliant chiasm of a much different sort for Corianton. Remember that in Alma 36 Alma used chiasmus to help convey the sense of conversion, the turning point in Alma's life. He was one thing, but now he is something else, so it all revolved around that turning point. Here in Alma 41, this very

cleverly balanced chiasm reinforces that same sense of restoration, hoping that Corianton will change to be one set of things so that he can be restored in the end to those characteristics and qualities.

By the way, when I read the German translation of this passage in 1967, I was disappointed that Alma had come close but was not precisely chiastically here, because the German rendered the first half of this text as follows:

- (a) Gutes/Gutes,
- (b) Rechtschaffenes/Rechtschaffenes
- (c) Gerechtes/Gerechtes
- (d) Barmherzigkeit/Barmherzigkeit.

But then in the second half, the order was:

- (d) Barmherzig
- (b) Rechtschaffen
- (c) Gerecht
- (a) Gutes.

Seeing it that way, I went on. It wasn't until several months later that I read this passage in English and there it was in perfect chiastic order! The German defect easily had occurred because the words in German for "justice" and "righteousness" are more interchangeable than they are in English. Seeing this was an added confirmation for me that Joseph Smith's translation is indeed miraculously accurate, even better than very diligent translators had done in the early twentieth century!

And now I'm happy to report that the 2003 German translation has fixed this dislocation and, indeed, that the Church handbook of instructions to translators in all languages now alerts all translators to be mindful of such literary patterns as chiasmus and to preserve them in the target language whenever possible.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "[Why and How Did Alma Explain the Meaning of the Word 'Restoration'?](#) (Alma 41:1)," *KnoWhy* 149 (July 22, 2016).

Alma 42

Alma 42:1–9 — The Need for Mercy

When mankind was placed on this earth and Adam and Eve fell, God still had a choice of what to do for us. As Adam and Eve had sinned, He could have just cancelled the plan and obliterated the whole situation, according to verse 6. But, as Alma pointed out, it was part of God's strategy not to do that. He placed instead some boundaries and a flaming sword around the tree of life so they could not lock themselves into an eternally fallen state. He gave laws with blessings and punishments, so that Adam and Eve could make choices.

This point is important for Alma's logic. Because God chose to bear with us, He did so by appointing that we would die. We would not be stuck in this lone and dreary world forever. Providing us a way to return home to Him was an essential part of His loving plan. And so, He gave us time. We will not know how long our individual times will be, but we do know that we have time, a probationary time. That merciful gift is the heart of God's great plan of mercy, redemption and happiness.

Alma 42:10–13 — Mortality is a Probationary State to Repent

This is a very subtle point that undergirds Alma's extraordinary explanation of God's justice and mercy that runs throughout Alma 42. Why is the granting of time to repent so essential? Let's suppose that you commit a sin two minutes from now. If justice were the only virtue that God had, what would prevent God from punishing you for that sin, for allowing the full consequences of that transgression, to be felt in your life immediately? Indeed, if He is *just*, what justifies any delay in the imposition of that penalty? In our law, we have the concept of due process, and we give notice, and we give people time to gather their witnesses, to think about their arguments, and let them ponder over the consequences of the possible verdicts. Judges need time to hear all the arguments, read the law, and consider all the factors before issuing a judgment or verdict. But God does not need to gather any more evidence against us. He knows everything about our case already. And God does not need to study the law and wonder about the proper imposition of consequences in this particular case. He always judges rightly, and He does not need to delay, to double-check for mistakes or anything that has been overlooked. What is there, then, that stops Him from being perfectly just in acting right now? The answer is mercy. But He must also be merciful, since He perfectly embodies all virtues, and mercy is a virtue, and so He mercifully allows time for us to repent.

Of course, you cannot repent until you have committed sin, and if God were to immediately punish us the instant we sinned, there would be no chance at all to learn, no meaningful opportunity for choice and progression, let alone any need for or purpose to

the law of repentance. Alma explicitly connected the granting of this probationary time with the concept of mercy (Alma 42:23). It is the mercy of God that stands in the way of the sword of justice falling upon us immediately.

Yet, mercy cannot rob justice. And so, eventually, in its appointed time, justice will be met because God must be just. Thus He is both merciful and just, and therefore a perfect God in every sense.

In the 2007 film *The Bucket List*, a survey asked, “Would you like to know how much more time you have before you die?” In the movie, ninety-nine percent of the people in the survey said, “No, I would rather not know.” This film is about two people who are dying of cancer. They know their death is imminent, and the question is, how are they going to respond to it? Perhaps we do not like to think about the fact that we will die. We would rather not know whether we have 32 years or 32 days left, because we just do not like to confront the inevitability of our mortality. But in reality, there is a time allotted. God through His mercy has given us some amount of time, and we need to be sure to use that time for repentance.

Alma 42:5–16 — The Plan in All its Phases

Comprehending God’s justice and mercy require an understanding of God’s plan, for it is in the context of that plan that all of His many attributes operate and are made manifest. Thus, throughout Alma’s words to Corianton, Alma speaks often of what we usually call the Plan of Salvation, but he also points to different aspects of that plan of the Father. He spoke of the word “plan” ten times, used in the following terms:

- the plan of *restoration* (Alma 41:2),
- the great plan of *salvation* (Alma 42:5),
- the great plan of *happiness* (Alma 42:8, 16),
- the plan of *redemption* (Alma 39:18; 42:11, 13), and
- the plan of *mercy* (Alma 42:15, 15, 31).

We like to talk about the great plan of happiness or the plan of salvation. But when was the last time you spoke of or heard somebody talking about the plan of restoration or the plan of mercy? I do not think these are just synonymous names for *the plan*, because when you look at the context in which these different aspects of the great plan are spoken of, Alma was addressing different phases, different dimensions, different ways in which the plan is moved forward and its results, as well as who is moving the plan forward, how and in what ways, and for what purposes.

When Alma referred to the plan of mercy (Alma 42:15), he very movingly said, “and now the plan of mercy could not be brought about except ...” Mercy is essential, but it is a

means to an end, not an end in itself. Realize that Alma talks about restoration, salvation, justice, and the requirements that must be met, as well as mercy. He had described justice as necessary. He explained that justice requires certain things, and in order to achieve the eternal goals, there must be repentance. And in order for repentance to apply, Alma taught of all the factors that must come into play, and the last of many is the plan of mercy, which “could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore, God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” (Alma 42:15). God himself needs to be merciful for His own great plan to work. And Alma knew this from his own conversion (Mosiah 27:28; Alma 38:7), and he had mentioned before that God’s “arms of mercy are extended” unto all men (Alma 5:33) and that, by His Atonement, His “bowels maybe filled with mercy according to the flesh” (Alma 7:12). But until Alma answers the deep theological questions of his son Corianton, we do not see him explaining mercy, and not just as a dimension of His plan, but as a necessary attribute of God.

Thus, to think that “the plan of mercy” is somehow just another way of talking about “the plan of salvation” misses many things. It is not just people on earth that must try to satisfy the plan of mercy. God himself is necessarily a party to this plan. He must provide for an atonement in order for the plan of mercy to work. God himself *must* be *merciful* as well as *just*. As Alma stated, He must be *a perfect, just God*. Thus, He must express all virtues. It is not enough that His children be merciful. They must learn to be as He is, which includes all the virtues that are brought into the plan. In Alma 42:13–14, Alma talked about justice and how justice cannot be destroyed; if God would let justice be destroyed, then He would cease to be God; but that cannot happen, and so we know that justice *must* exist, and also mercy, the time within which to satisfy the just demands of repentance. Most eloquently, Eliza R. Snow stated this full doctrine in the final verse of the hymn “How Great the Wisdom and the Love,” which reads, “Where justice, love, and mercy meet in harmony divine!” (Hymn 195, verse 6).

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Are There So Many Different Names for the Plan of Salvation?](#) (Alma 42:5, 8, 13, 15),” *KnoWhy* 312 (May 12, 2017).

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Does Alma Mention “the Plan” Ten Times in His Words to Corianton?](#) (Alma 42:13),” *KnoWhy* 150 (July 25, 2016).

Alma 42:13-15 — Mercy and Justice Are Crucial to the Plan of Salvation

The words *mercy* and *justice* in Hebrew have gender. *Wisdom* and *mercy* are represented by female concepts, whereas *justice* is often male. We do not know the Nephite language,

so we do not know if this was so in their language. However, Alma did indicate that they are opposites: “For behold, justice exerciseth all *his* demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is *her* own; and thus, none but the truly penitent are saved” (Alma 42:24). It is interesting that he expected God to be *both* just and merciful in order to be a perfect God. Perhaps the translation retained the male and female designations to say that, at one level, while *justice* and *mercy* are opposites of each other, they are both created in the image of God and they are necessary partners and counterparts to each other. In other words, males and females are both human beings, but are both manifestations of the same divine nature.

Along these lines, Elder James R. Rasband devoted an entire General Conference talk to this subject, how God’s judgment can, does, and must satisfy both the divine virtues of justice and mercy. The entire talk is a very clear and cogent sermon drawing primarily on Alma 42. He commented, in part, as follows:

A vital and peace-giving contribution of the Book of Mormon to our understanding of the Savior’s Atonement is its teaching that Christ’s merciful sacrifice fulfills all the demands of justice. As Alma explained, “God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” [Alma 42:15]. The Father’s plan of mercy—what the scriptures also call the plan of happiness or the plan of salvation—could not be accomplished unless all the demands of justice were satisfied. (Rasband, General Conference, April 2020).

In contrast, traditional theologians have often denied that God can be both *just* and *merciful*. They see this as a conflict, a contradiction, and God must be consistent. That problem may have arisen when the early Christian concept of God was defined by such philosophers as Augustine and Plato, who argued that God or the pure form can have no body and is beyond space and time. They argued that as God is eternal and timeless, and to be both *merciful* and *just* simultaneously would be philosophically impossible, and thus in their view, God must ultimately be one (mercy, love) or the other (justice, exacting). We do not believe in an abstract God like that. We believe in a God who not only had a body that exists in space, but also manages time, even uses time, and can grant a window of time for the benefit of his people. He can be just through His use of time and space to give a period of mercy.

Alma was not constrained by these philosophical limitations placed on the scriptural doctrine of God by Christian theology. Alma understood the nature of God, and his plan. He had encountered it in his own personal life and experience. Alma thus had both experience and revelation on his side.

Elder Rasband noted Alma’s sorrow as the demands of justice weighed on him: “Remember that as a young man, Alma went about seeking ‘to destroy the church.’ In fact, Alma told his son Helaman that he was ‘tormented with the pains of hell’ because he had effectively ‘murdered many of [God’s] children’ by leading ‘them away unto destruction’ (Alma 36:13–14). Then he noted what caused Alma’s joy and relief:

Alma explained to Helaman that peace finally came to him when his “mind caught hold” on his father’s teaching “concerning the coming of ... Jesus Christ ... to atone for the sins of the world” (Alma 36:17). A penitent Alma pleaded for Christ’s mercy (Alma 36:18) and then felt joy and relief when he realized that Christ had atoned for his sins and paid all that justice required. ... Part of Alma’s relief must have been that unless mercy interceded, justice would have prevented him from returning to live with Heavenly Father (Rasband, Conference April 2020).

Further Reading

James R. Rasband, “[Ensuring a Righteous Judgment](#),” General Conference April 2020.

Alma 42:23–25 — All Men Will Be Judged According to Their Works

What we as humans really hope for is for all of us to return to God, and to stand before Him to be judged. Many people fear the judgment of God. Righteous or repentant people, however, can and should look forward that day, because they know that all of this doctrine is true. As Alma said, death and dying is a necessary part of happiness, and without going through death, we would not be able to be raised, glorified, and restored. We think about the hope that we feel in situations of death, where we hope to see one another again. Knowing that the Gospel is true, we realize that the more we know it to be true, the more we repent, and the more that hope becomes a reality.

Alma 42:30 — Mercy Depends on Repentance

Alma expected his son to no longer deny the role of justice. Corianton had been led to believe that God would not punish people, thus there was no need for repentance. That is a sinner’s vain hope—an infinitely merciful God who does not apply the laws of justice, and therefore there is no point in repentance. They talk themselves into believing in a God who will just beat us with a few stripes and all will be well. As Nephi prophesied,

And there shall also be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin; yea, lie a little, take the advantage of one because of his words, dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this; and do all these things, for tomorrow we die; and if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God. Yea, and there shall be many which shall teach after this manner, false and vain and foolish doctrines, and shall be puffed up in their hearts,

and shall seek deep to hide their counsels from the Lord; and their works shall be in the dark. (2 Nephi 28:8–9).

Corianton had probably learned that from Korihor and the Nehorites (see also the discussion above of Alma 39:17). Alma, on the other hand, clearly hoped and expected that Corianton would understand that justice and mercy go hand-in-hand together, and that repentance is a necessary component of God's plan of mercy, redemption, restoration, and of eternal salvation and happiness.

As we will see in the rest of the book of Alma, Corianton apparently took his father's advice and remained in good standing (Alma 42:31; 43:1–2; 63:10). What ways occur to you in which you can internalize more deeply the very core of Alma's explanation that God can be, and indeed must be, both just and merciful?