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Introduction

suggestions for reading, meditation, and prayer



The image of a small portion of Michelangelo's fresco, "Creation," found above serves as metaphor for the means and ends of our scripture readings and ponder questions.

- ? How would you characterize God's arm in the fresco?
- ? How would you characterize Adam's arm?
- ? What is the message in Adam's limp wrist? In the fact that his arm rests on his knee?
- ? How does Adam, as painted in Michelangelo's fresco, represent all of us as we engage in scripture study and seek to understand scripture, scripture's divine author and our relationship to Him?
- ? How does Adam, as painted in Michelangelo's fresco, represent all of us as we seek God's enlivening, strengthening, and saving influence and presence in our daily lives?

Michelangelo reminds us of our desperate need for God's presence in our lives if we are to follow Him and be all that He hopes us to be. In relation to this page and its purposes, we are in need of God's help as we seek to understand and apply scripture.

The questions we posed and our brief commentary concerning the fresco represent an example of our approach to each scripture reading.

Scripture readings are accompanied by what I call "questionary," questions for meditation with brief comments. The questions are often such that they contain a sort of commentary as they lead the reader toward specific insights. In addition to the passage-specific questions associated with each reading, the reader can apply the following general questions to most readings. These questions come from the purposes of scripture as identified in the introduction to our site found on the site's home page

- ? What does this reading reveal about the character of God?
- ? How and what does this reading testify of Christ?
- ? What wisdom and knowledge does this reading provide?
- ? How does this reading direct the way you think and act?
- ? Of what dangers does this reading warn? How does it help you avoid these dangers?
- ? How does this reading gladden your heart, encourage you, and give you hope?
- ? How does this reading expand your vision and increase your expectations of the possible?
- ? What does this reading discern or "read" about you?
- ? How will you apply this reading to your life, to how you relate with others, and to how you relate to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

It is not intended that the reader ponder and meditate on every question. We introduce numerous and varied questions in hopes that readers will find a question or two that catches their imagination and interest, seems pertinent to their lives, and provides an opportunity for meaningful meditation and further spiritual insight. In addition, if the reader wishes, the many and varied ponder questions allow the reader

to spend additional time to consider passages from various perspectives.

Finally, we suggest that during and after your reading and meditation experience you consider how you can incorporate your thoughts and feelings from the scripture reading into your personal prayer life. As you pray, share with Heavenly Father what you thought and felt as you studied and meditated the day's passage. In your prayer, seek further insight from a God who is anxious to reveal himself, his will, and his interest in our lives. Incorporating your reading and meditation into your prayers can, we think, enliven a prayer life that can all too easily become mundane, mechanical, and rote.

1 Nephi 11-14—nephi’s first visions

meditation 1—introductory

There is little doubt that Lehi’s dream, commonly called “The Tree of Life Vision,” is one of the most beloved sections of the Book of Mormon—right behind 3 Nephi’s narrative of Jesus’ visit to the Americas. Nephi was certainly impressed by his father’s dream. No wonder, since the dream not only contained spiritual direction and doctrinal instruction, but also hinted at Nephi’s own future, along with that of his brothers.

Above all, the dream told of “a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy... most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted.” Upon eating it, Lehi reported, “it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy” (See 1 Ne. 8.¹⁰⁻¹²). Lehi witnessed many other important symbolic elements in his dream. But another stood apart from the others, placing just behind the tree in significance. This element stood in contrast and opposition to the tree. It was the infamous “great and spacious building.” The dream, then, was really about two opposing forces, each vying for the attention and affections of humankind: the tree and the building.

In this series of meditations, we will discuss these opposing forces as they were revealed to Nephi in the course of his tutorial which he received under the direction of, initially, “the Spirit” and then, “an angel.” As I understand it, Nephi’s tutorial consists of fourteen visions, each, except the first, introduced with a heavenly invitation to “Look” (1 Ne. 11.^{1-14.30}).¹

After the first two introductory visions (11.¹⁻⁷ and 11.⁸⁻¹¹), Nephi witnesses events from the Savior’s life in the third through the ninth vision. Then with the second half of the ninth vision and running through the fourteenth vision, Nephi witnesses the nature and dangers of the great and spacious building, or the wisdom and pride of the world, that stands in opposition to God, and how the Lord responds to its opposition, evils, and dangers. The length of these final visions, which are roughly chronological, illustrate the importance of the building to the vision, how the building stands in opposition to God, and what God does to assist us resist and overcome the allure that the building represents.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹ As I understand them, the 14 visions of varying lengths, are: 11.¹⁻⁷; 11.⁸⁻¹¹; 11.¹²⁻¹⁸; 11.¹⁹⁻²³; 11.²⁴⁻²⁵; 11.²⁶⁻²⁹; 11.³⁰; 11.³¹; 11.³²⁻³⁶; 12.¹⁻¹⁰; 12.¹¹⁻²³; 13.^{1-14.8}; 14.⁹⁻¹⁷; 14.¹⁸⁻³⁰

1 Nephi 11.¹⁻³

¹*After I had desired to know the things that my father had seen, and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain, which I never had before seen, and upon which I never had before set my foot. ²And the Spirit said unto me: “Behold, what desirest thou?”

³And I said: “I desire to behold the things which my father saw.”

meditation 1

Before Nephi’s visions can begin, he must be prepared for them. His preparation consists of at least three elements: desire to understand, faith in God’s willingness and ability to grant understanding, and the willingness to exert his faith through thought and prayer. We begin with his desire.

“after I had *desired to know* the things that my father had seen, and *believing that the Lord was able to make them known* unto me, as *I sat pondering in mine heart*...

Nephi had confessed his desire earlier.

“*After I, Nephi, having heard all the words of my father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision, and also the things which he spake by the power of the Holy Ghost, which power he received by faith on the Son of God—and the Son of God was the Messiah who should come—I, *Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things...*” (1 Ne. 10.¹⁷).

The importance of righteous human desire and God’s inclination to respond to it is not to be underestimated. In one of his well-known parables, Jesus tells of a man indebted to the tune of ten thousand talents—a debt impossible to repay. The debtor pleaded with the loaner, who happened to be king, to forgive the debt, whereupon the king, “moved with compassion,” “loosed him, and forgave him the debt.” Later, when the debtor had forgotten the benefit granted him, the king reminded the debtor of the grace that was shown him: “I forgave thee all that debt, *because thou desiredst me*” (See Mt. 18.²³⁻³⁵).

Nephi not only possesses a righteous desire to understand. He also possesses a correct idea of God, His character, and His willingness and even joy in responding to righteous human desires. Nephi believes that he can come to understanding

“by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him, as well in times of old as in the time that he should manifest himself unto the children of men. For he is the same yesterday, today, and forever; and the way is prepared for all men from the foundation of the world, if it so be that they repent and come unto him. For *he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them*, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round” (1 Ne. 10.¹⁷⁻¹⁹).

It is always nice to believe that God has given understanding to many past faithful inquirers in innumerable matters. But this is not enough. We must believe that he hasn’t changed, that he is always the same, and that he will respond to us as he has responded to the faithful inquirers of the past. Nephi believed this.

But Nephi did not approach God in inquiry empty handed. He believe that God would provide a feast, but that he needed to bring a spoon to the feast with him. So, in preparation for the anticipated revelation, Nephi tells us that he

“sat pondering in mine heart.”

This is Nephi practicing the principle that God would later teach the young Joseph Smith.

“Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me...” (DC. 9.⁷⁻⁹).

Because of Nephi’s desire, trust in a generous God who opens his heart (See DC 35.²⁰) to faithful inquirers through revelation, and his willingness to evidence his desire and trust through personal spiritual and intellectual effort, however humble, Nephi was gifted with the fourteen visions that served him and us with understanding, inspiration, and life-direction. Through Nephi, we are reminded of Jesus’ beloved invitation.

“Ask, and it shall be given you;
seek, and ye shall find;
knock, and it shall be opened unto you:
For every one that asketh receiveth;
and he that seeketh findeth;
and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.
Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?
Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?
If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children,
how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?”
(Mt. 7.⁷⁻¹¹).

As we study take such invitations to heart and study Nephi’s fourteen visions, we, like him, can deepen our understanding and appreciation for God’s great plan of happiness, salvation, and mercy.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 2

We do not know how long it has been since Lehi related his life-changing “Tree of Life vision” to his family. Whether days, weeks, or months, Nephi is still turning the dream over and over in his mind. He desires to understand. He believes that God is the kind of Being who responds to the sincere desires of a petitioner. Having demonstrated his sincere desire and trusting belief by thinking, pondering, and praying about all that his father told him, Nephi is suddenly “caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain, which [he] never had before seen, and upon which [he] never had before set [his] foot.”

One can imagine Nephi’s confusion as he looks around and finds himself in an unfamiliar place. One can imagine his heightened concentration as he considers where he might be, which direction home might be, and if and how and when he might be able to return. Perhaps this heightened concentration is one of the purposes behind his sudden removal from a known to an unknown location. To whatever degree Nephi has been thinking and pondering in hopes of understanding his father’s dream, it has been insufficient. He needs to be shocked into an even more heightened mode of concentration. Being suddenly and uncertainly whisked off to some unknown height would certainly serve to do just that.

But Nephi’s being whisked off to a location “which [he] never had before seen, and upon which [he]

never had before set [his] foot,” might signify more than the need for increased concentration. It might also signify that Nephi is about to enter a new intellectual and spiritual world unlike anything he has previously experienced. Indeed, unlike anything he has ever even imagined. The dream and the interpretation thereof is expansive in ways far surpassing his previous and present expectations. Whatever Nephi’s speculations about the meaning of his father’s dream, they were too small. Too provincial.

This can serve as warning, invitation, and encouragement to all of us. We often underestimate God and the degree to which He is willing and able to enter our lives. We underestimate His ability to reveal and create beyond our myopic vision and expectations.

Jesus’ mother, Mary, like her ancestress, Sarah, underestimated God. Given her circumstances, she could not imagine how God might fulfill His promise of a son. She needed to be reminded,

“Is any thing too hard for the Lord?” (Gen 18.¹⁴)

“With God nothing shall be impossible” (Lk. 1.³⁷).

No doubt, Jesus learned this lesson through his own experiences with his Heavenly Father, but we have to believe that his mother planted this seed of faith in God in his heart. We hear Jesus speak the truth that his mother had learned when he reassured a wavering father that his demon possessed son could be made well and whole.

“Jesus said unto him, ‘If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth’” (Mark 9:²³).

Jesus passed this truth on to his disciple, Saul of Tarsus, who then passed it on to the saints of Ephesus. God, he bore witness “is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask of think” (Eph. 3.²⁰).

This is true in all aspects of our lives. But, Nephi’s experience on the unknown mountain and in receiving a revelation far beyond his previous speculations and imaginings, reminds us that it is certainly true of our ability to receive revelation. In this regard, we too often live, as Brigham Young once complained, “far below our privileges.” God does not think small. When it comes to bestowing revelation upon those who love and serve him, He has very, very expansive desires.

“For thus saith the Lord—‘I, the Lord, am merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end. Great shall be their reward and eternal shall be their glory. And to them will I reveal all mysteries, yea, all the hidden mysteries of my kingdom from days of old, and for ages to come, will I make known unto them the good pleasure of my will concerning all things pertaining to my kingdom. Yea, even the wonders of eternity shall they know, and things to come will I show them, even the things of many generations. And their wisdom shall be great, and their understanding reach to heaven; and before them the wisdom of the wise shall perish, and the understanding of the prudent shall come to naught. For by my Spirit will I enlighten them, and by my power will I make known unto them the secrets of my will—yea, even those things which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor yet entered into the heart of man” (DC 76.⁵⁻¹⁰).

Oh, “who could have supposed that our God would have been so merciful!” (Al. 26.¹⁷)

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 11.⁴⁻⁷

⁴*And the Spirit said unto me: “Believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?”

⁵And I said: “Yea, thou knowest that I believe all the words of my father.”

⁶And when I had spoken these words, the Spirit cried with a loud voice, saying: “Hosanna to the Lord, the most high God; for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all. And blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the most high God; wherefore, thou shalt behold the things which thou hast desired. ⁷And behold this thing shall be given unto thee for a sign, that after thou hast beheld the tree which bore the fruit which thy father tasted, thou shalt also behold a man descending out of heaven, and him shall ye witness; and after ye have witnessed him ye shall bear record that it is the Son of God.”

meditation

Upon setting Nephi down on the top of an unknown mountain, the Spirit already knows of Nephi’s desire to understand his father’s dream, his faith in God’s willingness and ability to grant his wish, and the effort in thought and prayer that he has already invested in hopes of achieving his desire. Nevertheless, the Spirit allows Nephi to exercise his agency and provides him the opportunity to verbally express his desire. “Behold, what desirest thou?” the Spirit asks. Nephi’s answer is immediate.

“I desire to behold the things which my father saw.”

It is at this point that the conversation takes an unexpected turn; a turn that, I believe, serves as an early interpretive key to understanding Lehi’s dream. We might have expected the Spirit to ask, “Do you believe that your father saw *the vision* of which he has spoken?” But that is not what the Spirit asks. Rather, he asks,

“Believest thou that thy father saw *the tree* of which he hath spoken?”

This difference between what we might have expected and what we get is important. The Spirit’s question serves to remind us that the tree is at the center of the dream. Everything revolves around, leads to, and responds, positively or negatively, to the tree. Without the tree, the dream would be unmoored, pointless, meaningless. The Spirit’s tutorial will remain fixed on the tree throughout, though with different perspectives.

Upon hearing Nephi’s positive reply, “Yes, I do,” the Spirit turns his attention from Nephi to God and expresses praise for God as, apparently, he surmises that Nephi’s belief came, largely, due to God’s grace in Nephi’s life. And, indeed it had.

“I, Nephi, being exceedingly young, nevertheless being large in stature, and also having great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord; and behold *he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe* all the words which had been spoken by my father...” (1 Ne. 2.¹⁶).

We have, in our first *Short Simple Sermon* in this series, already noted how responsive God is to a mere desire. Often the desire is the merest whisp of a desire to just believe (See AI 32.²⁷).

After praising God for his merciful oversight over all the earth, the Spirit promises “a sign.” This, like the Spirit’s unexpected question serves as another interpretive hint. Here is the “sign” or signal.

“After thou hast beheld the tree which bore the fruit which thy father tasted, thou shalt also behold a man descending out of heaven, and him shall ye witness; and after ye have witnessed

him ye shall bear record that it is the Son of God

With the announcement of the “sign,” Nephi’s first vision closes. He will experience the promised sign in his second through ninth visions. However, the promise itself, as we have suggested is an interpretive key. First, he will see the tree. Then, immediately, he will see Jesus. The tree... then Jesus. The tree.... Jesus. Just to be clear the tree and Jesus are juxtaposed with each other.

Why?

We will let the reader ponder on that while we recap.

SPIRIT: “Nephi, what do you want?”

NEPHI: “I want to see what Dad saw?”

SPIRIT: “Do you believe your Dad saw *the tree* [not ‘the vision’]?”

NEPHI: “Yes.”

SPIRIT: “Thank you, God, for having so blessed this boy!”

SPIRIT: “O.K., then, Nephi. Your visions will begin like this. First, you will see the tree. Then, immediately afterwards, you will see Jesus, the Son of God.”

Clearly, the Spirit is pretty fixated on the tree.

So, again, why juxtapose the tree... and Jesus? Nephi will learn, as, I’m sure, you already know, that the tree and Jesus are intimately connected. In fact, we could just say, indeed, we do say that they are one and the same. The tree is a sign, signal, symbol for Jesus. But we will wait on Nephi before saying more about that.

But we will say, now, as we so often do, “Today is as good a day as any.” What’s today a good day to do? Today is as good a day as any to acknowledge that we are what we are, we believe the truths that we believe, we do the good that we do, however imperfectly, because of God’s merciful intervention and participation in our lives. Today is also as good a day as any to listen carefully to the questions that enter our heads; listen to the questions because they are so very often the initial promptings of the Holy Spirit—promptings that are intended to bring us to greater revelation and to greater understanding of, appreciation for, and intimacy with the Lord Jesus.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 11.⁸⁻¹¹

⁸*The Spirit said unto me: “Look!”

And I looked and beheld a tree; and it was like unto the tree which my father had seen; and the beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow. ⁹After I had seen the tree, I said unto the Spirit: “I behold thou hast shown unto me the tree which is precious above all.”

¹⁰And he said unto me: “What desirest thou?”

¹¹And I said unto him: “To know the interpretation thereof”—for I spake unto him as a man speaketh; for I beheld that he was in the form of a man; yet nevertheless, I knew that it was the Spirit of the Lord; and he spake unto me as a man speaketh with another.

meditation

In his first vision, Nephi was transported to an exceeding high mountain which he had never seen, let alone climbed before. With his transport to this previously unknown mountain, Nephi’s mind was more focused and more prepared for the revelations that he was about to receive, first from the Spirit and then from an angel. In addition, his transport to a previously unimagined location signified that the revelations he was about to receive would go well beyond whatever thoughts and speculations he had previously entertained concerning the importance and meaning of his father’s dream. His first vision ended with a “sign.” This was the sign.

“After thou hast beheld the tree which bore the fruit which thy father tasted, thou shalt also behold a man descending out of heaven, and him shall ye witness; and after ye have witnessed him ye shall bear record that it is the Son of God.”

With the angel’s “Look!” in today’s reading, we come to Nephi’s second vision in which he saw the first half of the promised sign: the tree.

I know that it might simply be thought of as the printer’s choice, that ‘!’ of the angel. But whoever or whyevery they made it, I have always appreciated the choice. In it, I hear the angel’s seriousness in wanting Nephi to not only see what he is about to be shown, but to carefully consider and understand its significance. In addition, I think that I hear in the angel’s exclamation point the excitement and joy he feels at what he is so privileged to reveal. I can’t help thinking of the huge “multitude of the heavenly host”—angels—who appeared to lowly shepherds at Jesus birth and joyously sang,

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Lk. 2.¹⁴).

There ought to be a ‘!’ on the end of that sentence too. I know I feel it. And I know that the tree that Nephi is about to see is worth a lot more than just one exclamation point. We could fill the universe with exclamation points and still not capture the grandeur of the tree

Nephi’s father had described a tree “whose fruit was desirable to make one happy.” The tree’s fruit, he said, “was most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted” and “white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen. Upon eating the fruit, “it filled [his] soul” with such “exceedingly great joy” that he came to feel that “it was desirable above all other fruit” (1 Ne. 8.¹⁰⁻¹²).

Now, Nephi sees the selfsame tree. It is everything he had heard it was, and more. “The beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty,” admitted Nephi. “The whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow.” No doubt about it, it was “precious above all.”

Some might have been satisfied at that. Walked away full. But, apparently, the Spirit heard something

in Nephi's voice or saw something in his countenance, or felt something in his soul that gave him reason to think that Nephi, grateful for what he had been privileged to see, was hungry for more.

“What desirest thou?”

“I want to know what it *means*! I want to know what the tree symbolizes. I am smarter than to be literal minded all the time. I am smart enough to know that whatever appears literal often bears within itself a more lasting and eternal significance.”

“As a matter of fact, I know that while you appear in the physical form to be a man, you are something more than a man. You are something more enduring. I know, in fact, that you are God.”²

I appreciate Nephi's reluctance to settle even in a moment of the utmost gratitude and wonder at what he had already seen. His refusal to settle, his request to know if there was more, propelled him on to the next revelation, and the next, and the next one after that. It propelled him on to a lifetime of revelation and deepening understanding, appreciation, and intimacy with that Being, “even God, the greatest of all” (DC 19.¹⁸).

As we have already suggested, and as will become clear as the visions continue, Nephi was right. The tree is symbolic of something, or, better, of someone. It is, in the end, a multifaceted symbol for Jesus, Son of God. And he does, as Nephi and his father so beautifully testify, have within him a sweetness and whiteness that surpasses all others. He is, indeed, precious above all. His brings a joy that is truly beyond words.

Paul was right to pray that we

“May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

² We will not engage in that old and tired debate about whether Nephi had been speaking to the always disembodied “Holy Spirit,” or the still disembodied Yahweh, or whoever. The fact is, he was conversing with a God, whether God, the Father, or God, the Son, or God, the Holy Spirit. That's enough for me. What one hears and sees and feels from any one of them is the same as one hears and sees and feels from each of them.

1 Nephi 11.¹²⁻¹⁸

¹²*He said unto me: “Look!”

And I looked as if to look upon him, and I saw him not; for he had gone from before my presence.

¹³*I looked and beheld the great city of Jerusalem, and also other cities. And I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin, and she was exceedingly fair and white. ¹⁴*I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: “Nephi, what beholdest thou?”

¹⁵And I said unto him: “A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.”

¹⁶And he said unto me: “Knowest thou the condescension of God?”

¹⁷And I said unto him: “I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.”

¹⁸And he said unto me: “Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.”

meditation

Nephi: “What is 8 + 8?”

Spirit: “George Washington.”

Nephi: “Excuse me?”

Spirit: “George Washington. He was the first president of the United States.”

Nephi: “But, my question was, ‘what is 8 + 8?’ Why do you answer a question that I did not ask?”

What, you may ask, does this short dialogue have to do with Nephi and his tutorial?

Good teachers and good tutors address needs, concerns, and questions that are pertinent and asked. One doesn’t ask for bread only to be given a stone (See Mt. 7.⁷⁻¹¹). We must keep this in mind as we continue our examination of Nephi’s tutorial.

The Spirit has already demonstrated that of all the “symbols” found in Lehi’s dream, the one that most interests him is the incomparable tree. Responding to Nephi’s desire to “behold the things which my father saw,” the Spirit asked him, “Believest thou that they father saw *the tree* of which he hath spoken?” Hearing Nephi’s affirmative reply, the Spirit granted Nephi a view of the tree, juxtaposed with “the Son of God.” Upon seeing the tree—everything that his father said it was—and sensing, apparently, the Spirit’s unwavering focus on the tree above all else, Nephi asked “to know the interpretation thereof.”

The vision that follows, Nephi’s third in relation to his father’s dream, is in direct answer to this question: “What does the tree represent?” Any response that does not answer this direct question would be like answering “George Washington,” to the question, “What is 8 + 8?” The answer to the question is “16.”

Like a camera that begins its view from afar and then zooms in closer and closer on a specific object, Nephi is first shown the land of Israel with its many cities. As the camera zooms in, he sees first Jerusalem and then Nazareth.

Nephi: “What does the tree represent?”

Spirit: “Here, let me show you Nazareth.”

Nephi: “Why Nazareth? What does Nazareth have to do with the tree?”

The camera zooms in closer, entering one of the abodes of the ancient city.

“Nephi: “What does the tree represent?”

Spirit: “Here, let me show you a virgin?”

Nephi: “Why a virgin? What does a virgin from Nazareth have to do with the tree?”

The camera zooms in closer on the virgin, sitting in her abode in Nazareth.

“Nephi: What does the tree represent?”

Spirit: “Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.”

It seems to me that unless the Spirit is an unreliable tutor and witness, giving a stone where bread is asked, he has faithfully answered Nephi’s specific question: “What is $8 + 8$... What does the tree represent?”

“ $8 + 8 = 16$... The tree represents the Son of God.”

The visions that follow seem to support and confirm this conclusion. But, before turning to them, we must make note of one central question that the Spirit posed to Nephi: “Knowest thou the condescension of God?”³

Nephi confesses that he does not. But he does understand that love flows through every scene he has seen. He has felt it engulf the village of Nazareth. Encompass the virgin. “I know,” Nephi testifies, “that he loveth his children.”

The Psalmist testifies that God

“humbleth himself
to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth!” (Ps. 113.⁶).

³ I am not really happy to feel the need to address this impossible issue, but, here goes. In the course of addressing it, I will be making several points. I do not know, or care how the virgin, Mary, became pregnant. Whether God somehow mysteriously and spontaneously fertilized an egg as in traditional Christianity, or whether an embodied immortal engaged in sexual intercourse with an embodied mortal as suggested by Brigham Young, who, freed by the bold imagination of his predecessor, Joseph Smith, felt free to entertain any damn thought that popped into his noggin, all speculations are worse than useless. Here, I show my conservatism. Scripture did not address such questions because they did not contribute to the writers’ purpose or human advancement. I am interested in the purposes and intentions of scripture, not idle speculation.

While I do not have a dog in this fight, I do have a strong sense that when Nephi speaks of “the condescension of God,” he heard, “the condescension of Yahweh.” He was no modern day “Christian,” with a trinitarian view of the Godhead. Neither was he an modern day “Mormon” with a Godhead constituted by three separate and distinct beings.

Now, commensurate with His habit, He has come down, visited, and loved a lowly, powerless virgin. She herself would say,

“He hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:
for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;
and holy is his name” (Lk. 1.⁴⁸⁻⁴⁹).

Or, as the Psalmist put it,

“He raiseth up the poor out of the dust,
and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill” (Ps. 113.⁷)

Now, commensurate with His character, He is coming down to enter a “tabernacle of clay” (Mos. 3.³) and live and move and work among, yea, love a lowly, fallen race. Nephi will see this condescension in its fulness in following visions. He will see just how much God loves a world that is seemingly unloving and unlovable.

“Marvel that he would descend from his throne divine
To rescue a soul so rebellious and proud as mine,
That he should extend his great love unto such as I,
Sufficient to own, to redeem, and to justify.
Oh, it is wonderful that he should care for me
Enough to die for me!
Oh, it is wonderful,
Wonderful to me!” (LDS Hymn: “I Stand All Amazed”).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 11.¹⁹⁻²³

¹⁹*I beheld that she was carried away in the Spirit; and after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time the angel spake unto me, saying: “Look!”

²⁰And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms. ²¹And the angel said unto me: “Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?”

²²And I answered him, saying: “Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things.”

²³And he spake unto me, saying: “Yea, and the most joyous to the soul.”

meditation

Through personal faith and engaged pondering, Nephi has demonstrated the sincerity of his desire to “behold the things which my father saw,” and so come under the tutelage of Spirit on an unknown and “exceedingly high mountain (1st vision). Nephi has seen the tree which his father saw, has seen it juxtaposed with “the Son of God,” and has seen that the tree is every bit as desirable as his father testified (2nd vision). Wanting more, wanting to know what the tree represented, Nephi has been shown the Israelite city of Nazareth, along with one of its residents: the most beautiful virgin imaginable. He has learned that the virgin is “the mother of the Son of God” (3rd vision).

As Nephi’s 4th vision opens, we must remember his question, the question that the angel is surely in the process of answering: “What does the tree represent?” The angel shows Nephi the same virgin as before, but this time “bearing a child in her arms.” He then announces,

“Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!”

Just as the Spirit had juxtaposed the tree and “the Son of God” in Nephi’s 2nd vision, the angel now juxtaposes, once more “the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father” with the tree.

“Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?”

It could not be more obvious. We now anticipate Nephi’s answer to the angel’s question: “the tree is ‘the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father.’” But, this is not how Nephi phrases his answer.

“Yea, *it is the love of God*, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men...”

It is worth considering why Nephi answers as he does. Nephi does not yet know what kind of life the Son of God will lead—that revelation will come in the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th visions. Nor does he yet know what sort of death he will die—this revelation is pending, awaiting his 9th vision. But, having witnessed his birth, Nephi does know that the Son of God will live. Live among human beings!

As we have said so often, while we readily see atonement in his suffering and death, the incarnation of God is, itself, no less an act of at-one-ment, an expression of God’s connectedness and solidarity with us, even in our weakest, most exposed, naked, and sinful state.

What kind of love is this? What kind of commitment?

Think what it cost him, God the Son, to come to earth, even without suffering and death. Think what glory he left behind, he who left his divine habitation where

“Justice and judgment are the habitation of thy throne:
mercy and truth shall go before thy face’ (Ps. 89.¹⁴).

“where thou sittest enthroned, with glory, honor, power, majesty, might, dominion, truth, justice, judgment, mercy, and an infinity of fulness, from everlasting to everlasting” (DC 109.⁷⁷).

And think how he left this glory only to be battered every day, day in and day out by human perversion. Think how his holy sensitivities were “offended.” Think. Just think what it must have been like to be in such close proximity to the vilest of perversion when once he dwelt in such holiness. Nephi could not know, yet, how the Son of God would respond to these assaults of human perversion, though he would learn as his visions continued.

It boggles the mind. All of it. Boggles the mind just as it did Enoch’s when he saw God so attached to human beings that God wept when he saw their suffering.

“And thou hast taken Zion to thine own bosom, from all thy creations, from all eternity to all eternity; and naught but peace, justice, and truth is the habitation of thy throne; and mercy shall go before thy face and have no end; how is it thou canst weep? (Moses 7.³¹).

And he didn’t even get to come here and live a life of luxury and power and prestige. He was born in a place stinking of manure. Dressed in rags. Laid in a feeding trough. Lived in a backwater region of a backwater country. Here he would suffer the same privations as everyone else. Nay, worse privations than anyone else. Indeed, when it was all said and done, he would have “descended below them all” (See DC 122.⁸).

Since the beginning of his visions, Nephi has felt the love of God pervading every moment. Nephi will see even more evidence of God’s love as his visions multiply and expand. But just this much, just the very divine act of incarnation is enough to help Nephi understand the depth of God’s love and commitment to him and to all of us. Even these initial revelations of the incarnation was enough to demonstrate to Nephi that the love of God was “the most desirable above all things.”

But the angel, could not leave it at that. The love of God was also “the most joyous to the soul.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 11.²⁴⁻²⁵

²⁴And after he had said these words, he said unto me: “Look!”

And I looked, and I beheld the Son of God going forth among the children of men; and I saw many fall down at his feet and worship him. ²⁵And *I beheld that the rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life; which waters are a representation of the love of God; and I also beheld that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God.

meditation

This vision, Nephi’s 5th, is granted, remember, because of Nephi’s sincere desire to “know the interpretation” of the tree which his father and then he have seen. In his two previous visions, Nephi has observed a beautiful, but unnamed virgin who anode in the Israelite city of Nazareth. We know this virgin to be Mary. Nephi has seen that she bore a son, who is “the Son of God,” Jesus. Seeing all of this in juxtaposition to the tree and in response to his desire to know what the tree represents, Nephi comes to understand that the tree represents the love of God. This love is manifest in the Son of God and his incarnation. In this 5th vision, Nephi has a fuller view of the incarnation as he “beheld the Son of God going forth among the children of men.” The tree, then, can be understood to be a representation of Jesus himself.

While the tree and the great and spacious building dominate Lehi’s dream, and will dominate Nephi’s interpretative visions, there are other elements to the dream. In this current vision, Nephi sees that the river of water which, his father saw, “ran along, and... was near the tree” (1 Ne. 8.¹³), also represented the love of God. In addition, Nephi observed that the “rod of iron, which [his] father had seen, was the word of God.” He also observed that this rod of iron “led... to the tree of life.” In other words, the rod of iron led to the love of God.

Now, during his earthly ministry, Jesus maintained above all else that he “was in the beginning with God (Jn. 1.²), and that he “proceeded forth and came from God” (Jn. 8.⁴³). He was “the Word” (Jn. 1.¹) who had “come down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me” (Jn. 6.³⁸). Jesus testified of such things over and over again.

Jesus was a revelation. He was God’s revelation of Himself; of His true nature and character. Jesus was, then, God’s introduction of Himself to humankind.

“No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared [introduced] him” (Jn. 1.¹⁸).

Every word Jesus uttered and every act Jesus performed—right up to and including his suffering and death—was Jesus “acting out” the Father. “Do you hear what I am saying? I am saying the very thing that God would be saying if he were here right now.” Thus, spoke Jesus. “Do you see what I am doing in this moment? I am doing the very thing that God would be doing if he were here in this moment.”

“He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (Jn. 14.⁹).⁴

Of course, Jesus could say and do and be all of this because he was, in fact, God. His real name, his divine name was Yahweh.

⁴ Please, do not become distracted by trinitarian questions about the Godhead. Such distraction only serves to confuse and, worse, causes us to appreciate and experience the beauty of Jesus’ message less than we might.

We can see in all of this the powerful versatility of symbolism. The tree is a representation of the love of God as revealed by Jesus. The river is a representation of the love of God as revealed by Jesus. The iron rod is a representation of the word of God as revealed by Jesus.

The tree, the water, and the rod of iron are, all at once, representations of Jesus.

Jesus was “the Word” that “was made flesh, and dwelt among us (Jn. 1.¹⁴). He was a living message from, of, and about God. He was a living, breathing, thinking, speaking, acting revelation of, from, and about God. His word, his message, his revelation was simple: “God is love” (1 Jn. 4.⁸). “Don’t believe me? Watch me. I am the proof.”

The multitudes—including his closest disciples—that followed him, clung to every word he spoke, and marveled at every action he took, were no great theologians. They never did really comprehend who and what he was until after his death and resurrection. But they sensed something. They sensed, I believe, the love of God. It was this that caused so “many [to] fall down at his feet and worship him” as Nephi witnessed.

Nephi does not yet know of his death and resurrection. That will come in a later revelation. But he will eventually learn, like those who knew Jesus during his earthly sojourn,

“Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us” (1 Jn. 3.¹⁶).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 11.²⁶⁻²⁹

²⁶And the angel said unto me again: “Look and behold the condescension of God!”

²⁷And I looked and beheld the Redeemer of the world, of whom my father had spoken; and I also beheld the prophet who should prepare the way before him. And the Lamb of God went forth and was baptized of him; and after he was baptized, I beheld the heavens open, and the Holy Ghost come down out of heaven and abide upon him in the form of a dove. ²⁸And I beheld that he went forth ministering unto the people, in power and great glory; and the multitudes were gathered together to hear him; and I beheld that they cast him out from among them. ²⁹And I also beheld twelve others following him. And *they were carried away in the Spirit from before my face, and I saw them not.

meditation

From his perch on top of an exceedingly high mountain and in response to his sincere desire to see and understand his father’s dream, Nephi has been shown the tree which his father had seen—a tree that is desirable above all. In answer to his desire to know what the tree represents, Nephi has seen the tree juxtaposed with “the Son of God,” Jesus. He has seen Jesus’ virgin mother, Mary, has seen Mary bearing the Son of God in her arms, and has seen Jesus “going forth among the children of men. Nephi has learned that the Son of God, Jesus, is the incarnate manifestation or revelation of God and of his love. The angel has named all of this “the condescension of God!”

In Nephi’s sixth vision, all that he has seen is expanded upon through the angelic invitation, “Look and behold the condescension of God!” Upon following the angel’s direction, Nephi sees the Son of God and discovers that he is the same being whom his father had called “the Redeemer of the world.” He also sees that this Redeemer, also known as “the Lamb of God” (for reasons that will become more clear to him through future visions) subjected himself to baptism, an ordinance intended for sinners with the hope of the remission of sins. This is another act of “condescension,” and indicative of the Son of God’s intent to “in all things... be made like unto his brethren” (Heb. 2.¹⁷). He would, in all things, become at-one with them.

Nephi also sees that after participating in this ordinance devoted to the sinner’s cleansing, the Son of God was gifted with the Holy Spirit who descended upon him from an open heaven. Here, we should perhaps pause for a moment. It is unsurprising that Nephi would be shown Jesus receiving the Holy Spirit. If Jesus was to be the one who baptized with fire, or with the Holy Spirit, as the Baptist testified, then it only stands to reason that he himself would be so baptized. But, the detail of Nephi’s vision is somewhat unexpected. Specifically, the detail about the Holy Spirit descending from heaven and “abiding” on him “*in the form of a dove*” seems unexpected. Is this aspect of the Spirit’s appearance—“in the form of a dove” really that central to Jesus’ experience?

Many see the dove as a symbol for peace, without explaining why? Is there something inherent in a dove that makes one think of peace? I have had doves in my backyard for years. They do not inherently bring the subject of peace to my mind. So, what’s with the dove?

I don’t know for sure, and you are welcome to decide that I am grasping at straws, but I do know that the most famous dove of all, and one that was intimately associated with water was the dove that came back to Noah with an olive leaf/branch—another object associated with peace—in its mouth. Noah took the dove’s return with an olive leaf as a sign that the destructive storms were over and that peace and quiet would return to the earth. Whatever else the dove may signify, its appearance at Jesus’ rising from baptismal waters that symbolize death and the grave, signifies that in Jesus the storms that threaten spiritual death are quieted. Those who come to him find an ark. And they are ushered into a world in which the storms cannot bring death. Jesus is master of the tempest.

In the course of his visions, Nephi will observe many storms—storms of human violence and

bloodshed and storms of nature. And he will know and lament the fact that these storms are all the result of individuals and societies rejecting Jesus and entering the great and spacious building. Indeed, in this vision, Nephi sees that, like Noah who offered deliverance from the storm and was rejected, Jesus was rejected and “cast... out from among them” notwithstanding the fact that “he went forth ministering unto the people, in power and great glory.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 11.³⁰⁻³¹

³⁰And *the angel spake unto me again, saying: “Look!”

And I looked, and I beheld the heavens open again, and I saw angels descending upon the children of men; and they did minister unto them.

³¹And he spake unto me again, saying: “Look!”

And I looked, and I beheld the Lamb of God going forth among the children of men. And I beheld multitudes of people who were sick, and who were afflicted with all manner of diseases, and with devils and unclean spirits; and the angel spake and showed all these things unto me. And they were healed by the power of the Lamb of God; and the devils and the unclean spirits were cast out.

meditation

In his first six visions, Nephi learned of the centrality of the tree in his father, Lehi’s, vision. He came to understand that the tree is a representation of the “love of God,” a love that is manifest in the Son of God. This son of God, we know, is Jesus of Nazareth, the Redeemer of whom his father spoke, and, indeed, God (Yahweh), Himself.

Nephi’s understanding came as a result of his having seen the birth or incarnation of the Son of God. This incarnation is, itself, a revelation of God’s love. Nephi observed the Son of God “going forth among the children of men” and engaging in activities that they, themselves, engage. Nephi saw that Jesus specifically and purposefully participates in baptism, an ordinance designed for the remission of sinners’ sins. This engagement and participation in human activities is another revelation of God’s love and commitment to humankind. Nephi also saw that the Son of God received the Holy Spirit, a sign of the healing he would bring to humankind, and evidence of his authority to bestow the Holy Spirit upon all who come to him.

Now, in his seventh and eighth visions, Nephi is witness to additional important aspects of Jesus’ earthly ministry. What Nephi sees in his short seventh vision may surprise us. Nephi “beheld the heavens open again, and... saw angels descending upon the children of men; and they did minister unto them.”

We might find this surprising because the New Testament Gospel writers, so focused on Jesus’ ministry, do not record the ministry of angels during Jesus’ earthly ministry. That said, they do record the ministry of angels leading up to his birth. An angel appeared to Zacharias to inform him that he and his wife would have a son who would prepare the ground for the coming Messiah. The same angel appeared to Mary to inform her that she would bear Messiah. An angel appeared to Joseph to inform him that Mary was bearing Messiah and that he should proceed with his marriage to her. A host of angels appeared to shepherds in Bethlehem’s fields to inform them that Messiah had been born, and to invite them to go and see him.

We should not be surprised, then, that angels were likely busy appearing to many during Jesus’ ministry. In a time without corporate or social media, angels may have been instrumental in informing individuals of the Messiah’s presence and directing them where to go to find him—individuals such as the man covered in leprosy, the woman with an issue of blood, a centurion whose servant died, Jairus who lost a daughter, a father who lost a son to an unclean spirit, short statured Zacchaeus who happened to find a tree to climb so as to see Jesus, etc. etc. Even Jesus, himself, is beneficiary to the ministry of angels as an angel strengthened him during his terrible ordeal in Gethsemane.

In his eighth vision, Nephi watches as Jesus, true to the sign of the dove at his baptism, calms the physical, emotional, and spiritual storms that threaten to overcome and destroy individual lives. Jesus had the power in equal measure to heal the body and heal the soul. Indeed, the former was often a

sign for the latter, as Jesus made clear to religious leaders who questioned his power to forgive the sin of a palsied man (See Lk. 5.¹⁷⁻²⁶). In “casting out” “devils and unclean spirits,” Jesus demonstrated his willingness and ability to release, redeem individuals from forces, influences, and powers that overwhelmed individuals’ native capacities to resist and conquer.

Other Book of Mormon writers witnessed the incarnation of God and his willingness and power to heal, and his anxiousness to give control back to the individual through his calming influence. Notable among them was King Benjamin. He saw, as Nephi did in his visions, that “with power, the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay.” Note, please, his “the Lord Omnipotent,” and his testimony that he “reigneth... from all eternity to all eternity,” reminders that the Son of God is God, the Son, the great Yahweh.

Like Nephi, King Benjamin saw that this Lord Omnipotent “shall go forth amongst men,” and that in going forth, he would work “mighty miracles, such as healing the sick, raising the dead, causing the lame to walk, the blind to receive their sight, and the deaf to hear, and curing all manner of diseases. And he shall cast out devils, or the evil spirits which dwell in the hearts of the children of men” (Mos. 3.⁵⁻⁶).

Others were privileged to view these same events. They too found the tree to be desirable above all.

Nephi asked: “What does the tree represent.” In answer to this question, the Spirit of the Lord and then an angel have ushered him through a series of visions in which he witnessed the conception, birth, and earthly ministry of the Son of God, the Redeemer, the Lord Omnipotent, Jesus of Nazareth. Through each event, one overriding reality has impressed itself upon the impressionable, open mind of the young Nephi, “I know that he loveth his children.”

In his incarnation, his birth, his life, and his ministry God has gone a long, long way to demonstrating that love. But there is one more act in this passion play, one final demonstration of just how far God will go to prove his love to a humanity that is doubtful, always doubtful about God’s commitment to every individuals. We will turn next to that vision, Nephi’s ninth.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 11.³²⁻³³

³²And *the angel spake unto me again, saying: “Look!”

And I looked and beheld the Lamb of God, that he was taken by the people; yea, the Son of the everlasting God was judged of the world; and I saw and bear record. ³³And I, Nephi, saw that he was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world.

meditation 1

In response to his desire to know the “interpretation” of the tree that was central in and to his father’s dream, an angel has shown Nephi the incarnation of God. This incarnation is a powerful evidence of God’s feelings of attachment to and love for his children. In addition, the angel has shown Nephi the love of God in action through Jesus’ earthly ministry, a ministry focused on healing and restoration. Nephi was blessed to witness individuals regain control of lives overwhelmed by forces, powers, and influences often previously unrecognized and unmanageable. Such individuals regained control through the physical and spiritual healing brought about by the love and power of God.

Nephi, then, was permitted views of the various manifestations of the love of God. We have highlighted and discussed these manifestations in the order and pace at which Nephi discovered them. His discoveries have guided and determined the nature and pace of our discoveries. In doing so, we have danced around the single greatest manifestation of God’s love. But, in this, Nephi’s ninth vision, he finally comes to this greatest manifestation of God’s love, thus allowing us to revel in it ourselves. In this vision, Nephi sees that God, the Son, died by being “lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world.”

The love expressed by God’s willingness to be part of individual human lives, as evidenced by his incarnation, is beyond comprehension. The love he shows in his willingness and ability to heal and calm and restore is appreciated beyond our ability to express. The expressions of his love are manifest in innumerable ways. Certainly, he shows his love for us when he answers a prayer, however trivial. He expresses his love when he helps us discover a lost possession, when he assists us with a test, when he gives us wisdom to help a troubled or sick child, when he provides some financial resource, etc., etc. But, as much as we may appreciate all of these blessings, we need to understand and acknowledge that they pale in comparison to the greatest manifestation of his love.

The more “trivial” and mundane expressions of his love must never detract or distract from the greatest expression of his love. If we ever find ourselves questioning his love and commitment to us because our life or the life of loved ones seem not to be going as we wish or expect, we have, perhaps, become guilty of trivializing his love and losing site of this greatest of all manifestations of his love.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15.¹³).

There simply cannot be any greater evidence of his love. Ever. It is a waste of time to look or imagine there is. In looking for the most evident and grandest manifestation of divine love, John landed upon the fact that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” who was “lifted up” on a pole as Moses had “lifted up the serpent” in order to bring healing and wholeness” (See Jn. 3.¹⁴⁻¹⁶). This same disciple bore witness that, “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us” (1 Jn. 3.¹⁶).

Jesus, God, Himself, in asking his latter-day disciples to “Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God,” pointed to the most incontrovertible proof: “*For*, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh” (See DC 18.¹⁰⁻¹¹). To remember that he “suffered death in the flesh” is to know just how much value he places upon our souls. Had his incarnation been the most transcendent

manifestation of the love he felt for and the value he found in humankind, he might have simply spoken of himself as “the Lord your Redeemer,” who “suffered in the flesh.” But the most transcendent manifestation of his love was to be found in his “suffering *death* in the flesh.”

But Nephi sees a bit more than this. Nay, a lot more than this. He sees that God, the Son, was “lifted up upon the cross.” It wasn’t, then, only the fact that he suffered death, but the manner in which he suffered death that served as irrefutable proof of his love. Here, we can almost see the tree, over which we, like Nephi and Lehi, have been nearly salivating, transformed into the cruel cross. Here, we think of the witness that Peter bore to the gentile, Cornelius, and those that Cornelius had gathered together at his home,

“We are witnesses of all things which he [Jesus] did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged *on a tree*” (Acts 10.³⁹).

Our beloved “tree of life,” then, that brings life to us, brought death to the Son of God. The tree becomes a cross, a sign of “the love of God.” I will have more to say about this in the next homily.

Up to this point, Nephi’s visions have been concentrated on the tree and its “interpretation.” His visions have focused on the incarnation and ministry of Jesus, Son of God. With Nephi’s vision of Jesus being “lifted up upon the cross”—the ultimate evidence of the love of God, represented by the tree—his visions take a sudden and dramatic turn. Nephi has seen and heard the very best that can be seen or heard about the tree. The visions will leave behind the glorious and healing and restorative ministry of Jesus and begin to focus on why we need healed and from what we must be delivered. From here on out, Nephi’s visions will focus on “the great and spacious building,” the evils that it represents, the destructive consequences it produces, and God’s labors to undermine and, finally, destroy the building that stands “as it were in the air, high above the earth” (1 Ne. 8.²⁶).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus

meditation 2

the ninth vision

Through a series of visions Nephi has learned that the beautiful and desirable tree that his father saw in his dream was a representation of “the love of God.” He has learned that the incarnation of God was an act of incomprehensible love. He has witnessed the incarnate God, the Son, minister to a humanity that was sick and possessed. He has watched as this Son of God healed these wounded souls and restored to them control in their lives that had previously been, not simply illusive, but impossible. Love has flowed through every word and every scene that Nephi has witnessed.

Now, in his ninth vision, and the final vision in this series of visions that focus on the life and ministry of the Son of God,⁵ Nephi witnesses the greatest evidence of love anyone can demonstrate. He sees that the Son of God “was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world.”

In this *Short, Simple Sermon*, we want to consider the importance of this ultimate vision. We have noted before that with the second half of this vision, Nephi’s attention is directed away from the life and ministry of the Son of God to the great and spacious building. That building and God’s response

⁵ If it is not already clear to the reader why we identify the first half of this ninth vision as the final vision in this series of fourteen visions that is related to Jesus’ life and ministry, we feel confident that it will become so as we make our way through all fourteen visions.

to the evils it represents dominate the remaining visions. It will not be the last time we witness God's love at work, but it will be the last time we see Jesus. So, we are especially interested in the fact that the last time Nephi sees Jesus in this series of visions, Jesus is hanging on a cross, dead.

an imprinted memory

When I was young, our little struggling branch moved from location to location as we lacked our own building in which to meet and worship. At one point, we met in a Seventh-day Adventist building, as they had no use for the building on Sunday mornings. I will never forget the scene that took place one early, bright, sunny Sunday morning as we prepared to enter the building, so graciously loaned to us. I will never forget the look of gleeful contempt on the face of one of the admired male members of our branch as he stood just outside the entrance to building, looked up, pointed determinedly and uncompromisingly at the cross that stood above the building's entrance, and contemptuously spat something like, "We're meeting here? In a building with a cross? Why do Christians use the cross? Why do they worship a dead rather than a living Christ?"

That moment and the feeling it produced in me is etched, imprinted in my memory. Sadly, it influenced my attitude toward other Christians and toward "the cross" for a couple of decades. Be assured, this is a memory that will stay with me to the end of my days on earth and that I will take with me into the eternities, wherever, there, I end up.

a delayed reaction and response

I wish I had known then, what I know now. I would have given him a piece of my mind, probably not as charitably as I should. I might have started by quoting something Jesus said on the road to Emmaus to the two disciples who also found Jesus' death by crucifixion embarrassing and inconvenient: "Oh fools and slow of heart" (Lk. 24.²⁵).

I might have continued with a rebuke of his ignorant provincialism and prejudice, followed up with an explanation of the central importance of the cross in understanding and appreciating Jesus, his work, his character, and his love for and commitment to each of us. I would have been very clear: "I worship a living Christ who died on a killing cross. Viewing that death, on that cross, is essential to one's salvation." I would inform him that "we can and should without hesitation, embarrassment, or hint of heretical unorthodoxy remember, speak of, glory in, and keep our eyes affixed to Calvary's cross."

I would also remind him, "You do realize, I assume, that the only ordinance in which you participate on a weekly basis is one that remembers, memorializes, and commemorates Jesus' death, broken body, shed blood, and all. So, please, don't tell me we have nothing to do with a dead and dying Christ."

the infraction lives on

Sadly, I continue to hear this same undiscerning pseudo-theology to the present. It comes from Church leaders—even a prophet has pedaled this trope—and members alike, who parrot and peddle such nonsense. So, now, the little piece of my mind that I wish I could have given to that brother all those years ago has morphed and grown into today's *Short, Simple Sermon*—a sermon inspired by Nephi's ninth vision, and this series of visions' final and ultimate vision of the Son of God hanging on the cross, the ultimate manifestation of God's love.

Many LDS question the use of the cross as a symbol to represent and commemorate Jesus and his atonement. Embarrassingly, some do so in simple, insecure, knee-jerk reaction to the rest of the

Christian world, using their use of the cross against them as a sign of alleged LDS superiority. To these, I say, “Grow up.”

Others respond negatively, or, at least, agnostically, to the cross because, as the old and tired saying goes, “We worship a living, not dead Christ.” Others possess a diminished view of the cross because they feel and believe that Jesus’ greatest suffering and real work of atonement was carried out in the Garden of Gethsemane. To such, I am more courteous, believing that they can be reasoned with.

the centrality of the cross in paul’s ministry

I’ll begin my defense of the cross as an appropriate and powerful symbol and reminder of Jesus and his atonement with what might be the weakest argument—weak only because it comes from the Apostle Paul, of whom LDS people seem to be almost as skeptical as they are of the cross. But that great Apostle of the Gentiles, without whom there may not even be a modern Christianity, often used the symbol of the cross as a representation of all that the gospel stands for. Thus, Paul informs us that he “determined not to know any thing... save Jesus Christ, *and him crucified*” (1 Cor. 2.²). “God forbid,” prayed the apostle, “that I should glory, *save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Gal. 6.¹⁴).

We might boast that “the power of God” is found in the “gospel,” or even in the “priesthood.” Not so Paul. He could find no greater manifestation of God’s power than “the cross.”

“For *the preaching of the cross* is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1.¹⁸).

Paul worried that he, himself, or an overly high estimation of him on the part of others, might cause “*the cross of Christ*” to be “made of none effect” (1 Cor. 1.¹⁷). He exalted that Jesus “reconciled” Jew and Gentile alike “*by the cross*” (Eph. 2.¹⁶). He boldly accused those who maintain the necessity of circumcision of doing so “lest they should suffer persecution for *the cross of Christ*” (Gal. 6.¹²), going so far as to call them “the enemies of *the cross of Christ*” (Phil. 3.¹⁸).

This brief survey ought to make clear how central “the cross” was to the early Christian Church’s message and its remembrances of Jesus. It certainly makes clear that for Paul, “the gospel of Jesus Christ” and the “cross of Christ” were inseparable and, in fact, essentially, synonymous. This is, perhaps, a reflection of Jesus’ own teaching, repeated often and variously,

“And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple” (Lk. 14.²⁷).

The cross on which Jesus died is not simply a theological artifact that shapes one’s view of atonement. It shapes one’s everyday behavior. Disciples without crosses are disciples without discipline—no disciples at all.

visions of crosses, not cups or gardens

Now, let’s turn our attention directly to Nephi’s ninth vision, his last in this series of visions that relate to the Son of God’s earthly mission. It ends, as we have observed, with Jesus hanging dead on the cross. Why? Did he not see the resurrection? If not, why not? If he did, why did he not end with that, rather than ending with Jesus dead on the cross? Was he not worried about people “worshipping a dead, rather than living Christ? These are questions that we will leave to the reader to consider and ponder.

While we’re at it, we have a few more questions for the reader to consider.

There is no doubt that Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane is important, even essential to the story of Jesus' own passion, his atonement, and the redemption that comes to us through it. I have suggested elsewhere that Jesus' use of the imagery of a "cup"—"if it be possible, let this cup pass from me"—is powerful and instructive. In fact, upon visiting the Nephites, Jesus declared that his drinking "out of that bitter cup which the Father [had] given [him]" included "all things from the beginning" which the Father had given him to do (See 3 Ne. 11.¹¹). The image of Jesus drinking from the bitter cup is powerful, but it is not unique to his Gethsemane experience. In suffering and dying on the cross, Jesus was continuing to drink from the same cup that tortured him in Gethsemane. In fact, I would argue that he drank from this cup every day of his life.

So, why did Paul and other early church leaders not utilize the imagery of the cup or the garden rather than that of the cross? Why did Nephi's visions concerning the life of Jesus not end with his experience in Gethsemane and his drinking a cup? Why not end with, "And I, Nephi, saw that in a dark and depressing garden he drank from the bitter cup for the sins of the world'?"

Indeed, why does no one end with or focus on that garden with its perfectly horrific cup if it is so much more significant than, or separate from Jesus experience on the cross at Calvary?

Why does Jacob admonish us to "view his [Jesus'] *death* and suffer his *cross*" (Jac. 1.⁸) rather than "view his bitter cup and drink from it yourselves."

If his suffering and death on the cross are not a vital part of "the bitter cup," why does Jesus invite the Nephites to "Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may *feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet*" (3 Ne. 11.¹⁴) as a follow up to his announcement of having drunk from the bitter cup? Why not have them hold the cup in their hands, feel its weight and look into its poisonous maw?

Why not invite Joseph and Oliver to "behold the bitter cup" rather than inviting them to "behold the wounds which pierced my side, and also the prints of the nails in my hands and feet"—this as a part of his admonition that they "look unto me in every thought"? (DC 6.¹⁶⁻¹⁷)

Why, throughout the New Testament, throughout the Book of Mormon, throughout the Doctrine and covenants is it always the cross rather than the cup? Why are the remembrances of Jesus' atoning passions always focused on the crucifixion at Calvary rather than the anguish of Gethsemane? Why are there no extended discussions of the meaning of Gethsemane, but so many on Calvary?

Conclusion

The plain and simple fact of the matter is, we can study hundreds of mentions of the cross and of crucifixion. We can explore hundreds of examinations concerning the meaning of the cross and of Jesus' crucifixion. But we find pitifully few mentions of Gethsemane or the cup, or examinations of the meaning of Gethsemane or its cup.

The symbol of the cross is not to be undervalued as we strive to understand, appreciate, remember, and commemorate Jesus' atonement and what it means to us. Indeed, there can be no devaluation of his experience on the cross as we seek to experience the incomprehensible joys that flow to us through his atonement. To devalue the cross, to give second place to his experience at Calvary is not based on scripture precedent or sound doctrine. Sadly, it is more likely based upon embarrassing attempts to justify prejudices and engage in un-Christ-like one upmanship, the prideful competition of ideas.

I am not advocating for the adoption of the cross as an LDS symbol, though it is certainly every bit as appropriate as a gold-leafed angel blowing a trump—a symbol that reminds one as much of the world's materialistic idolatry as the One who is supposed to be worshipped inside the structures atop of which he stands. But I am advocating for a fairer, more honest, less prejudiced view of other's Christian insights into its meaning. The cross, with its dying Christ, is as powerful a symbol of God's love as any symbol can be. It is as powerful a symbol of our own discipleship and what is expected of a disciple as any.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 11.³⁴⁻³⁶

³⁴And after he was slain I saw the multitudes of the earth, that they were gathered together to fight against the apostles of the Lamb; for thus were the twelve called by the angel of the Lord.

³⁵And the multitude of the earth was gathered together; and I beheld that they were in a large and spacious building, like unto the building which my father saw. And the angel of the Lord spake unto me again, saying: “Behold the world and the wisdom thereof; yea, behold the house of Israel hath gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

³⁶*I saw and bear record, that the great and spacious building was the pride of the world; and it fell, and the fall thereof was exceedingly great. And the angel of the Lord spake unto me again, saying: “Thus shall be the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

Meditation 1

Because of his desire to understand, his faith in God’s openness in responding to human desire, and his willingness to expend time and effort in understanding, Nephi has been privileged to see the manifestations of God’s love. This love is expressed through the incarnation of God, the Son; through his earthy ministry with its intimate contact with a wounded and possessed humanity; and, finally and ultimately, through his death on a cross. These manifestations of God’s love were represented in his Father, Lehi’s, dream by the tree which was beautiful and desirable above all.

With the Son of God hanging dead on a cross, Nephi’s ninth vision shifts. It shifts away from the beauty and love of the tree, the principle figure and symbol of the dream, to the ugliness and hate and conflict of the great and spacious building, the second most important figure or symbol of the dream. It is as though, having seen the beauty and desirability of the Son of God, Nephi wonders how and why on earth anyone would want to kill him. Among other things, Nephi’s remaining visions answer this question.

There is much to say about the great and spacious building, as is evidenced by the breadth and length of following visions. But, first and foremost, we must recognize this: it is the great and spacious building with its multitudes of occupants that is responsible for Jesus’ death and for the resistance that is brought to bear against his disciples, including his apostles. The building stands in direct opposition to Jesus and the principles for which he lived and died. It stands in opposition to anyone who would propagate or live by the principles Jesus lived and taught.

Whereas the Spirit and then the angel slowly, meticulously led Nephi step by step from one insight to another in order to help him understand what the tree represented, the angel takes no such care in explaining the interpretation of the great and spacious building. Rather, he gets right to it with one giant leap. “Behold,” says the angel,

“the world and the wisdom thereof.”

Nephi immediately discerns the meaning of the tree, a demonstration that his previous visions have brought a deepened spiritual maturity.

“I saw and bear record, that the great and spacious building was the pride of the world.”

The tutoring angel will later restate Nephi’s insight using slightly different language.

“The large and spacious building... is vain imaginations and the pride of the children of men” (1

Ne. 12.¹⁸).

Unfortunately, when we think of “pride,” we too often think of personal arrogance and hubris, with its rudeness toward others. But, as we will see in the following visions, pride is something more than this. Much more. Something far more pervasive and dangerous. To get at this something more pervasive and dangerous, I like to think of it like this: the great and spacious building represents those things, those people, those ideologies, those institutions in which humankind takes pride. The “pride of the world” represents all those worldly people, places and things that humans find so very attractive and alluring; things, people, ideologies, and institutions that the world values above God, Himself, and his divine principles.

As the visions continue, we will see that all these things, people, ideologies, and institutions that are represented by the great and spacious building, or the pride of the world, are those which produce worldly wealth, worldly power, and worldly prestige.

Wealth. Power. Prestige. All temptation is subsumed within this triad of temptation and pride. Nephi’s visions will return to these over and over again. Nephi sees, as John would later see in his series of revelations, that it is this pride, this inordinate love and drive for wealth, power, and prestige that brings conflict and destruction and, finally, the fall of societies and civilization. The great Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, himself living through the collapse of his own society, warned,

“Thus saith the LORD,
Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom [prestige],
neither let the mighty man glory in his might [power],
let not the rich man glory in his riches [wealth]:
But let him that glorieth glory in this,
that he understandeth and knoweth me,
that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness,
judgment, and righteousness, in the earth:
for in these things I delight, saith the LORD” (Jer. 9.²³⁻²⁴).

Whereas those who live in the great and spacious building live for wealth, power, and prestige—that which is desirable above all things, in its estimation—those who follow Jesus, as Jesus himself, live for fidelity toward others, justice toward others, and acting rightly toward others.

These two value systems stand in stark contrast to each other. The value system represented by the great and spacious building cannot abide the challenge to its value system that is represented in the tree. The tree sheds too bright a light upon the lies, the false attractions and affections, that the great and spacious building propagates. So, the building must annihilate the tree. The pride of the world must destroy the love of God. The building must kill the messenger, the Son of God, and destroy those who would dare follow him and maintain his faithful, just, and right cause. Thus, the great and spacious building inevitable brings war and rumor of war. It brings, as we will see over and over in the following visions, conflict, war, death, and destruction.

With Nephi, we will watch this contest play out in the course of his remaining visions. But, for now, today is as good a time as any to consider our attitudes toward those things in which the world takes pride: wealth, power, and prestige; for these things not only demanded the death of Jesus on a cross, they bring the death of Christ in our lives. To the extent to which these idolatrous lies have infiltrated our lives, today is as good a time as any to expel them and fully replace them with their opposites: fidelity, and justice, and right treatment of others. Today is as good a time as any to follow the Son of God’s bright example of love,

“He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good;
and what doth the LORD require of thee,
but to do justly, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Micah 6.⁸).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 2

In our first meditation on 1 Nephi 11.³⁴⁻³⁶, we found that the great and spacious building of Lehi’s dream represents the “wisdom,” “pride,” and “vain imaginations” of the world. The wisdom, pride, and vain imaginations of the world stand in opposition to God, the Son, and were responsible for his murder on the cross. They also oppose any who might adopt and follow the Son’s platform of love, acceptance, justice, and service to others. The great and spacious building competes with God for the affections of humankind. It too offers a platform of “love.” Unlike God’s self-sacrificing love, the world’s love is twisted and perverted, based on self-love, injustice, conflict, and selfishness.

We suggested that we should think of the “pride of the world” in terms of “that in which the world takes pride.” In a similar vein, we can think of the “wisdom of the world,” as that at which the world is skilled. We can think of the “vain imaginations of the world,” as those ideologies and behaviors that assume that personal value and individual security is to be found in the things of this world. Principle among the things that the world loves and erroneously believes will bring personal worth and security are wealth, power, and prestige. These are the things in which, above all else, the world takes pride.

These three—wealth, power, and prestige—can be thought of as a kind of false triune God. Idols, in Old Testament terms. It would require an entire book-length homily to adequately explore and expose each member of this anti-godhead for the devil that they are. We will, here, only examine one of them, and that very, very briefly.

In his final vision, Nephi is informed that one of Jesus’ original twelve, presumably John, the Revelator, will see everything Nephi saw and then some. In the course of the New Testament “Book of Revelation,” John uses different language and symbolism to represent the same insights that Nephi records in his fourteen visions.

John mentions no “great and spacious building.” But, we suggest, he uses another symbol to represent the same phenomenon. The shorthand name of the symbol is “Babylon.” But its full name is

“Mystery. Babylon the Great. The Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth” (Rev. 17.⁵).

Just as Nephi witnessed that the great and spacious building “fell,” and that “the fall thereof was exceedingly great” so too, John saw that “Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen...” (Rev. 18.²). John utilizes a series of seven laments, or taunts to describe this fall. In doing so, he reveals a central aspect the Babylon’s adulterous and abominable allure—one aspect of its “pride,” “wisdom,” and vain imagination.” In the first lament/taunt, John tells how “all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.” Then, we are told,

“The kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and *the merchants of the earth are*

waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies [luxuries, extravagancies]” (Rev. 18.³).

In the second lament/taunt, a heavenly voice expresses the hope that Babylon will be given “torment and sorrow” to match the degree to which it “*lived deliciously [luxuriantly]*” (Rev. 18.⁷).

In the third lament/taunt, we hear “the kings of the earth, who have committed fornication and *lived deliciously [luxuriantly] with her*” “bewail and lament for her” (Rev 18.⁹). This monarchic lamentation is followed in the fourth lament/taunt with the lamentations of “*the merchants* of the earth.” These “weep and mourn over her; for *no man buyeth their merchandise any more*” (Rev. 18.¹¹). Lest we think that this “delicious” or “luxuriant” lifestyle, or its abetting merchants are metaphorical, the fourth lament/taunt takes up space to catalogue the Babylonian merchandise that is no longer available.”

“The merchandise of gold, and silver, and precious stones, and of pearls, and fine linen, and purple, and silk, and scarlet, and all thyne wood, and all manner vessels of ivory, and all manner vessels of most precious wood, and of brass, and iron, and marble, and cinnamon, and odours, and ointments, and frankincense, and wine, and oil, and fine flour, and wheat, and beasts, and sheep, and horses, and chariots, and slaves, and souls of men” (Rev. 18.¹²⁻¹³).

Having catalogued Babylonian goods, the fourth lament/taunt grants us a listen into the previously mentioned mourning of the merchants.

“*The merchants* of these things, *which were made rich by her*, shall stand afar off for the fear of her torment, weeping and wailing, and saying, ‘Alas, alas, *that great city, that was clothed in fine linen, and purple, and scarlet, and decked with gold, and precious stones, and pearls!* For in one hour *so great riches* is come to nought” (Rev. 18.¹⁵⁻¹⁷).

The “merchants” are joined in the fifth and sixth lament/taunt by “every *shipmaster*, and all the *company in ships and sailors*, and as many as *trade by sea*.” These “stood afar off, and cried when they saw the smoke of her burning” (Rev. 18.¹⁷⁻¹⁸). “They cast dust on their heads, and cried, weeping and wailing, saying,

“Alas, alas, that great city, *wherein were made rich all that had ships in the seas by reason of her costliness...*”

In the seventh and final lament/taunt, we learn that “no *craftsman, of whatsoever craft he be*, shall be found any more in thee, and the sound of a millstone shall be heard no more at all in thee... thy *merchants were the great men of the earth;*⁶ for by thy sorceries were all nations deceived” (Rev. 18.²²⁻²³).

Well, all of this gives us insight into the nature of one aspect of the world’s pride, wisdom, and vain imaginations represented by Lehi’s great and spacious building with its triune pagan god, “Wealth/Power/ Prestige.”

It should be clear that when we speak of “wealth” we are speaking of something far more pervasive and insidious than personal income wealth; as insidious as this can be.⁷ When we speak of “wealth” in this context, we are talking about “economy” from manufacturing to transportation logistics to

⁶ Here, the third member of Babylon’s triune god, Prestige, raises its ugly head.

⁷ Due to the global nature of things, it is doubtful that personal income wealth has ever been more insidious than it is today in the form of the Jeff Bezoses of the world.

merchant to buyer to the economist—more conjurer, sorcerer than scientist—that provides the whole complex with its aura of mystery and phony spirituality. Economy is a principle source of worldly pride and one of the things at which the world is most skilled. It is the false god, “Economy,” we are informed—indoctrinated—that makes the world turn and brings joy, contentment, peace, and security. However, such false doctrine is part of the world’s vain imaginations. As it is practiced in this world, Economy is the exact opposite. It is, in fact, as John recognizes, “a great millstone” that drags the convert and practitioner into the depths of hell.

We do not need to understand the exact nature of “marks” on hands and foreheads or the arithmetic behind the satanic number 666 to appreciate the fact that individuals, billions of them, sell their souls for the privilege of “buying and selling” (See Rev. 13.¹⁸). Indeed, to see the lie, we only require the wisdom and patience of “saints”—those dedicated to the true God and opposed to the false god, Wealth/Power/Prestige, worshipped so ardently in the false temple of the great and spacious building.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 12.¹⁻³

¹*The angel said unto me: “Look, and behold thy seed, and also the seed of thy brethren.”

And I looked and beheld the land of promise; and I beheld multitudes of people, yea, even as it were in number as many as the sand of the sea. ²*I beheld multitudes gathered together to battle, one against the other; and I beheld wars, and rumors of wars, and great slaughters with the sword among my people. ³*I beheld many generations pass away, after the manner of wars and contentions in the land; and I beheld many cities, yea, even that I did not number them.

meditation

Through seven visions—the third through the ninth—Nephi has basked in the love of God. His visions of God’s love end with the greatest manifestation of divine love of all: the death of God, the Son. However, accompanying that final glorious vision of divine love came an ugly vision of hate—the hate that the world, in all its pride, wisdom, and imagination, aimed at God, the Son. With that hate it shockingly killed him who was desirable above all, and then turned its hate upon any who might dare love and follow him.

All this pride and wisdom and hate is represented by a great a spacious building. Standing tall on the opposite side of the river, and separated from the love of God by the very depths of hell, this building stands in committed, aggressive, and violent opposition to God and his love. It stands in opposition to all self-sacrificing love that seeks the welfare of others. It promotes—demands, even—self-serving and self-promoting love. It seeks to quench all sense of God’s love for humankind, humankind’s love for God, and humankind’s love for its own kind by replacing it with the love of self through the worship of the false triune god, Wealth/Power/Prestige.

In our previous homily, we looked at the Wealth aspect of this perverted triune god. We found that it has as much to do with the economies of nations as it does with personal income wealth. In today’s reading, the opening salvo in Nephi’s tenth vision, we see the consequences that flow from the worship of this devious triune god.

What follows next; what follows the introduction of the great and spacious building—the love of and desire for wealth, power, and prestige—is as natural as night following dusk, dawn following night, day following dawn, and dusk following day.

“I beheld multitudes gathered together to battle, one against the other; and I beheld wars, and rumors of wars, and great slaughters with the sword among my people. ³*I beheld many generations pass away, after the manner of wars and contentions in the land.”

The contentions, the battles, the wars, the continuous warfare, the great slaughters... all of these are the direct result of entrance into the great and spacious building. How could it be otherwise? The pride and the wisdom of this world, with its mad and insatiable desires for wealth and power and prestige is bound to lead to conflict and contentions. Left unchecked, the madness can only lead to battle, slaughters, and wars and continuous warfare until naught but destruction, collapse, and, finally, annihilation remains.

The contentions, the battles, the wars, the continuous warfare, the great slaughters represent some of the world’s most prized skills; part of the wisdom of the world. They flow directly from the pride of the world with its love of, desire for, and pursuit of wealth, power, and prestige.

It is pure madness.

Nephi watches all of this happen among his own people. But, we should not be fooled. What Nephi sees among his own people is simply a microcosm of that which has happened to very people, society, kingdom, and nation. It is a microcosm of what is happening across the globe and what will continue to happen until peoples and nations reject the false god, Wealth/Power/Prestige, and worship the only and true living God.

Unfortunately, the present offers little reason for hope that such repentance is in the offing. Just the opposite.

As we mentioned and briefly examined in our second homily on 1 Nephi 11.³⁴⁻³⁶, John the revelator saw all that Nephi saw, and then some. Using different language and symbolism, John saw the same great and spacious building. He saw its occupants indulge in a worldwide love affair with the idolatrous god, Wealth/Power/Prestige. And he saw, as Nephi saw, the devastating consequences of this indulgence. Indeed, it is precisely this vision with which his entire great apocalyptic vision began. All evil begins with this indulgence.

John's apocalyptic vision begins with the famous Four Horses of the Apocalypse. The first sits atop a white horse and represents the desire to conquer, dominate, and excel. The means and ends of such desire is, of course, our false god, Wealth/Power/Prestige. Driven by this unholy desire, the white horse becomes a red horse, symbolic of blood—the blood that flows and splatters the horse from violence, war, and “rumor of war.” Next comes the black horse, symbolic of the blood, now dried, that was splattered upon the horse. It is also symbolic of famine with its burnt crops, burn cities, and malnourished noncombatants. Finally comes the pale horse. Death of all sorts feeds upon the rotting corpses of a humanity enthralled by the madness of Wealth/Power/Prestige, while Hell sucks the soul into its murky depths.

Entire nations are consumed. Disappear. Where are the Sumarians? Where are the Babylonians? Where, the Assyrians, the Hans, the Greeks, the Romans, the British Empires, the Third Reich, and so on, and so on, and so on? The planet is littered with the dead—dead nations that engaged in the insane madness that is the great and spacious building. There can be little doubt that the madness continues; continues to feed on the foolish peoples and nations of planet earth. No doubt, there will yet be many national corpses littering the planet earth consumed by the mad desires of the great and spacious building.

How much longer do we imagine we have? How long before we join the corpses that have proceeded us? How long before Death and Hell devour all that we hold precious?

We've been warned.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 12.⁶⁻¹⁰

⁶And I saw the heavens open, and the Lamb of God descending out of heaven; and he came down and showed himself unto them. ⁷And I also saw and bear record that the Holy Ghost fell upon twelve others; and they were ordained of God, and chosen. ⁸And the angel spake unto me, saying: “Behold the twelve disciples of the Lamb, who are chosen to minister unto thy seed.”

⁹And he said unto me: “Thou rememberest the twelve apostles of the Lamb? Behold they are they who shall judge the twelve tribes of Israel; wherefore, the twelve ministers of thy seed shall be judged of them; for ye are of the house of Israel. ¹⁰And these twelve ministers whom thou beholdest shall judge thy seed. And, behold, they are righteous forever; for because of their faith in the Lamb of God their garments are made white in his blood.”

meditation

Today’s passage continues the theme of the great and spacious building, and describes one of the Lord’s strategies for combating the allure that the building represents. It is a marvel, really. In some ways, this part of His strategy is nearly as nonsensical as garments being washed in blood and coming out white. I will confess that I find the latter mystery far more compelling than the mystery of God’s calling of “twelve others.”

I must also confess that today’s reading is not my favorite. Far from it. I was tempted to skip right over it, but decided that honesty is better than avoidance. Some of those few who read this sermon will probably not agree with my decision, feeling that I should have just remained silent. The reader will either love what follows or hate it. It seems unlikely that any reader will be able to stake out a middle ground.

This business of 12 apostles, past, present, or future, leaves me underwhelmed. The institution, strange as it will sound to so many, doesn’t strike me as all that Biblical. Jesus sent his disciples into the world to evangelize, to be sure. But, to be a governing body... I don’t know. I’m not feeling it. It doesn’t ignite my mind, nor does it cause my bosom to burn.

First, there is the matter of those original 12. When I think of Jesus’ apostles, I am unimpressed. It is difficult to think of them as more than disciples, followers. And, based on the Gospel accounts, they aren’t all that great at being disciples. They are mostly clueless. They have no idea who and what Jesus is. They seem unable to evaluate him on any basis other than that by which the world judges character and nobility and power and greatness. Perhaps they have all of this in common with modern disciples that call themselves apostles.

And we never learn to think any better of them after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Yes, Peter has a moment here and there now and again in Acts, but, even here, he seems unimaginative and parochial. He is open enough to God that he can receive a revelation that the Gospel message is not exclusively for Jews. But then he can’t really live it as he remains stuck in his Jewish box. At least that is how Paul sees things as he lumps Peter in with “false brethren” and calls him a hypocrite (See Gal. 2). The church certainly didn’t become the “global” mega-church it became because of Peter’s efforts. That miracle seems to have flowed from the creativity of Paul, an uncertain “institutional” apostle who seems to have been barely tolerated by the original 11 survivors of Jesus’ inner circle.

Then, there’s the “latter-day” 12, numbering, now, after nearly 200 years, many dozens.

Some years ago a fellow member attempted to have me removed from my paid teaching position in the Church. He complained that he had never heard me testify that “the Church is true” (which seems

to mean something different to everyone who parrots it) or that “the Church is led by a prophet.” He was correct. He hadn’t. That wasn’t how I spoke. It’s surprising, really, that others hadn’t caught on.

I might say the church was led—that, itself, that “leading,” meant something different to me than him—by prophets, *plural*, but never *a* prophet. God is too wise to give that sort of power to an individual. Any individual. However well vetted they may be. Even when placed in the hands of a body of 15, it’s a dicey proposition, giving that kind of power to mortals.

Anyway, had my prosecutor been cleverer and just left it at that, he might have had me. I might have been out of a job. Fortunately, he didn’t have the sense to quit while he was ahead. He also had to add another charge. “The love of God. The love of God. The love of God.” The volume in his voice grew as his frustration mounted and his contempt grew. “I am sick and tired of hearing about the love of God from this man!”

Did I mention what a spectacularly strict follower of apostles and prophets he was? You probably already guessed it.

But, he was right on this count as well. I was obsessed with God and his unimaginably loving and generous character. Nothing excited me as He did. I wasn’t much interested in teaching much else. I “testified” constantly. Incessantly. But it was always focused on Jesus. Like Paul, I had made a very conscious determination. “I determined not to know any thing... save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2.²). This is, perhaps, what made me so slippery for those who felt some indeterminant reservation about what they heard coming from my mouth.

No, I am not all that impressed by “the Church” or its “apostles.” Part of the reason, perhaps, is that after meeting that most loving God up close and personal, “the greatest of all,” no one seems all that impressive. But, if I am honest, that’s not the whole story.

“The Church,” it’s members, and its apostles seem, to me, to be pathologically authoritarian and autocratic—in a patriarchal sort of way. All thinking comes from the top down and everyone falls in line without thought. It can feel very Orwellian. It is this, perhaps, that accounts for the unimaginative and provincial nature that I find in “The church,” it’s members, and its apostles. With so little creativity, I can’t imagine the worlds they imagine they will create so day. It seems likely that they will be square or rectangular worlds as it often seems to me that they now live in a tiny little box. The light that enters the box is so modest as to allow their surroundings to be seen only in black and white.

But, I live in a world with innumerable colors. A world in technicolor. I wouldn’t have it any other way. In fact, it is this metaphor of light and color that dominates my perspective on apostles, rather ancient or modern, old world or new.

The Book of Mormon story is barely out of the shoot when Lehi has his second vision.

“And being thus overcome with the Spirit, he was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God. And* he saw One descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day. And he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament” (1 and. 1.⁸⁻⁹).

Of anything ever written or spoken about apostles, this may just be the truest. The light they radiate is a bit brighter than a starry, moonless night. This is certainly a boon in a world that the temple characterizes as a “dark and dreary world,” and that scripture describes as “darkness” itself (See, for example, Jn. 1.⁵). Here, “the people that walk in darkness” (See Is. 9.¹) require that “the hidden things of darkness” (See 1 Cor. 4.⁵) be illuminated. The apostolic light seems rather shadowy in comparison to that light which is “above that of the sun at noon-day.”

I, for one, prefer to walk by the light of the sun. And not just any sun, but a sun whose luster is “above that of the sun at noon-day.” In so confessing, I do not belittle “the twelve” any more than Lehi did. They are not to be criticized when their light fades to near nothingness when placed next to him who is “the light of the world.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 13.¹⁻⁹

¹*The angel spake unto me, saying: “Look!”

And I looked and beheld many nations and kingdoms. ²And the angel said unto me: “What beholdest thou?”

And I said: “I behold many nations and kingdoms.”

³And he said unto me: “These are the nations and kingdoms of the Gentiles.”

⁴And *I saw among the nations of the Gentiles the formation of a great church. ⁵And the angel said unto me: “Behold the formation of a church which is most abominable above all other churches, which slayeth the saints of God, yea, and tortureth them and bindeth them down, and yoketh them with a yoke of iron, and bringeth them down into captivity.”

⁶And *I beheld this great and abominable church; and I saw the devil that he was the founder of it. And I also saw gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing; and I saw many harlots. And the angel spake unto me, saying: Behold the gold, and the silver, and the silks, and the scarlets, and the fine-twined linen, and the precious clothing, and the harlots, are the desires of this great and abominable church. ⁹And also for the praise of the world do they destroy the saints of God, and bring them down into captivity.”

meditation

Today’s reading begins the twelfth and longest of Nephi’s fourteen visions. His first eight visions were focused on Jesus, who was represented in Lehi’s vision by the tree of life.⁸ The ninth vision served as a transition vision from Jesus to the forces that oppose him and his followers.⁹ These opposing forces were symbolized in Lehi’s vision by a great and spacious building, which represented the wisdom and pride of the world, or that about which the world is skilled and in which it takes pride: wealth, power, and prestige.

The tenth vision¹⁰ begins with a description of the great and spacious building’s destructive nature as wars and rumors of wars break out for many generations, presumably over competition for wealth, power, and prestige. Then, after these many generations, we see Jesus’s opposition to the great and spacious building as he appears and puts a temporary end to the wars and rumors of wars. Here, we should assume that a commitment to Christ and his teachings checks individual, societal, and national drives for wealth, power, and prestige.

The eleventh vision¹¹ is a near mirror image of the tenth. It begins with peaceful impact of Jesus’ ministry and ends, as the tenth vision began, with wars and rumors of wars dominating many generations. Sandwiched in between the peace¹² and the war¹³ is a return to the nature and impact of the great and spacious building, signifying, again, its opposition to Jesus and the deleterious effects that the drive for wealth, power, and prestige have on humankind.¹⁴

In the tenth vision, then, we witnessed war and rumor of war among Nephi’s descendants brought on by the great and spacious building’s presence among them. In the eleventh vision, we witnessed war and rumor of war among Nephi’s brothers’ descendants brought on by the great and spacious

⁸ 11.¹⁻⁷; 11.⁸⁻¹¹; 11.¹²⁻¹⁸; 11.¹⁹⁻²³; 11.²⁴⁻²⁵; 11.²⁶⁻²⁹; 11.³⁰; 11.³¹.

⁹ 11.³²⁻³⁶

¹⁰ 12.¹⁻¹⁰

¹¹ 12.¹¹⁻²³

¹² Verses 11-12

¹³ Verses 19-23

¹⁴ Verses 13-18

building. As we begin the twelfth vision, we see the presence of the great and spacious building among the gentiles.

At this point, one might object: “Wait,” I see no mention of the great and spacious building in today’s reading.”

We will refrain from saying, “O fools and slow of heart,” and just move on to a demonstration of how, though the symbolism and vocabulary of this vision differs from the proceeding, its message remains the same. You will remember that in our meditations on 1 Nephi 11.³²⁻³⁶, we noted the visions’ interpretation of the great and spacious building as being the “pride” and “wisdom” of this world. Put differently, the great and spacious building represents those things in which the world takes pride and possesses skill. The world takes pride in the acquisition of wealth, power, and prestige, and is very good at it. With this in mind, we can have a look at today’s reading and the existence of this building in the gentile world.

Nephi sees the “formation of a great church. He sees that this church is “most abominable above all other churches.” He then characterizes the church. First he notes that the church “slayeth the saints of God, yea, and tortureth them and bindeth them down, and yoketh them with a yoke of iron, and bringeth them down into captivity.” Here, we see the exercise of power. Whereas the great and spacious building exercised its power to kill and persecute Jesus and his apostles,¹⁵ here, the great and abominable church exercises its power to kill and persecute all of Jesus’ disciples. In other words, both the great and spacious building and the great and abominable church stand in opposition to Jesus. They seek and use power in this opposition.

We saw earlier that the great and spacious building represents all those individuals and institutions that take pride in prestige. In this reading, we find that the great and abominable seeking prestige: “Also for *the praise of the world* do they destroy the saints of God, and bring them down into captivity.”

So far, then, the great and abominable church possesses two of the three drives characterized by the great and spacious building: power and prestige. We now turn our attention to the third of the triumvirate of drives: wealth.

“I also saw gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing; and I saw many harlots. And the angel spake unto me, saying: ‘Behold the gold, and the silver, and the silks, and the scarlets, and the fine-twined linen, and the precious clothing, and the harlots, are the desires of this great and abominable church.’”

Unlike power and prestige, which are less tangible and visible, wealth is extraordinarily tangible and easy to see. Elsewhere, we will want to explore in depth the relationship between materialism, or the drive for wealth and harlots. The pair of materialism and prostitution—and sexual immorality in general—have much in common and often run in tandem. But for now, we point out that the three gods worshipped in the great and spacious building—wealth, power, and prestige—are the same three gods worshipped in the great and abominable church.

Like the great and spacious building, the great and abominable “church” represents all institutions, secular or sacred, that have as their reason for being the accumulation of wealth or power or prestige or all of them together. It is these institutions and this prideful drive for wealth, power, and prestige that is the very heart of all conflict, individual, societal, and national. It stands in opposition to Jesus

¹⁵ 11.³²⁻³⁶

and his principles. Safety from the all conflicts, wars, and rumors of wars is only found in adherence to Jesus' teachings which warn of the dangers of the desire and accumulation of wealth, power, and prestige.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 13.¹⁰⁻¹⁴

¹⁰And I looked and beheld many waters; and they divided the Gentiles from the seed of my brethren.

¹¹And *the angel said unto me: “Behold the wrath of God is upon the seed of thy brethren.”

¹²And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, who was separated from the seed of my brethren by the many waters; and I beheld the Spirit of God, that it came down and wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land. ¹³And *I beheld the Spirit of God, that it wrought upon other Gentiles; and they went forth out of captivity, upon the many waters. ¹⁴And *I beheld many multitudes of the Gentiles upon the land of promise; and I beheld the wrath of God, that it was upon the seed of my brethren; and they were scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten.

meditation 1

Today’s text must be read within its context. It is a portion of Nephi’s twelfth vision (there will be a total of fourteen). While interpreting many events from his father’s dream, these fourteen visions seek especially to explicate the meaning and significance of the two most important elements: the tree and the great and spacious building. These two elements stand in opposition to one another. The first is the love of God and the things of God. The second is the love of this world and the things of this world.”

This twelfth vision, which began at 1 Nephi 13.¹, seeks to explicate the second element of the dream: the love of this world and the things of this world—especially wealth, power, and prestige. It is important to note, then, that immediately before today’s text, Nephi saw that the world was driven by its desire and love for wealth, power, and prestige (vs. 1-9).

This is the context for this reading. A “gentile” man, followed by other “gentile” men, followed by “multitudes of the Gentiles” came to America. They came, we should understand from the context, in search of wealth, power, and prestige. This was the driving force of the “gentile” culture and theology from which they came. The “gentiles” believed that they were God’s (exceptional) people. They believed that the indigenous population was something less than human (remember how the great and spacious building’s dwellers “point the finger of scorn.” 1 Ne. 8.³³) at anyone who does not live in and abide by the values of the building). Therefore, the invading “gentiles” claimed that the “wrath of God” rested heavily upon the indigenous peoples, justifying their violence against those very people. All this proved catastrophic for the indigenous people.

These “gentile” cultural and theological beliefs have persisted to this day. People all over the globe, in fact, have suffered “the wrath of God” as the “gentile” nations have scoured and scorched the earth in search of wealth, power, and prestige. But what, really, one must ask, is “What part did God play in all this? Does the fact that He predicted and described the events mean that He condoned them? Something to think about. Something we must take up in another meditation.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 2

Today’s text represents a portion of Nephi’s twelfth of fourteen visions. In it, he seems to see the man we know as Columbus. He seems to see that Columbus, with God’s help, defied the intellectual “captivity” that maintained the flatness of the earth, and so sailed to America. So far, so good. But

bad things would come from this good. America's indigenous peoples, as Nephi also saw, would suffer immensely and die by the millions, often violently at the hands of "gentiles."

In the current environment of 2022 America, we are engaged in a debate, again, about which part of this story we will allow to be told. Part of the problem is that we imagine, wrongly, that if the bad parts are told, the good parts will become illegitimate. Within my faith, there is the false notion that because God foretold the good and the bad, He is responsible for both—responsible for the good because of revelation, and responsible for the bad because of His "wrath." Because He predicted the bad, we seem to want to think that He condoned it. But predicting does not imply condoning. Prediction is simply truth telling, a description of "what really will be" without justifying or pardoning it.

Fortunately, I will not be asked to judge the man we call Columbus. God will do that. And He will do that in the spirit of truth; knowing what really was; knowing that the man really was insightful enough to go against the grain of the ignorant cultural biases of his day, and depraved enough to engage in irrefutable barbaric acts of violence against other human beings.

But we must be clear about this much. We need not rely on the interpretations of a dream. We have it from God's own mouth: "This is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger [or with the desire for wealth, power, and prestige], one against another, but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away" (3 Ne. 11.³⁰). This should put to rest all notions that the stirring up of gentiles to come to America and the subsequent rape, plunder, and murder of millions of God's children occurred under the inspiration of heaven. Yes, He described it. No, He did not prescribe it. And no, no, no, He did not inspire or condone it.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 3

I do not know what the future will know or think about events transpiring in the United States of America of 2022. I do not know what it will know or think about the current attacks on truth and reason that abound among its people. I do not know what the future will know or think about the current desires to censor and whitewash the past, including and especially our nation's past. I do know, though, that my faith has used passages such as today's to whitewash the past.

Now, if it were only a matter of whitewashing the past, we might not care. Who, after all, really cares about history? But the past and the doing and writing of history is often used to inform the present and as preamble to the future. So, we must care about the past and how it is understood. We must have an honest and true history of the past in order to assure an honest future.

And here's another thing I know. I know that "truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come" (DC 93.²⁴), or, in the language of Jacob, "things as the *really* are" (Jac. 4.¹³). Reality... such a slippery little devil to balance.

The reality is that "a man," presumably Columbus, but others as well, escaped the "captivity" of ignorance that taught, among other things, that the world was flat. The reality is that he sailed in hopes of acquiring the wealth and power and prestige that was the be all and end all of his culture—this, according to Nephi's visions. The reality is that he boldly sailed the oceans blue and came upon a land previously unknown to him. The reality is that here he found people, indigenous people, living

on the land. The reality is that he and his crew began a campaign of rape, plunder, mutilation, and murder that lasted centuries.

That's all simply fact. The reality is that, eventually, a new nation was born on this land that had been discovered by a man enlightened enough to think a new thought and depraved enough to engage in violence that was as old as human history. All of this is what really happened. It is truth, the brilliance and the ugliness together. We must be true enough to maintain the balance to hold it all together at once. And never, ever can we use the ugliness of the past to justify any ugliness in the present or to invent new ugliness in the future. For, truly, through the past, we hold the future in our hands.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 13.¹⁵⁻¹⁹

¹⁵And I beheld the Spirit of the Lord, that it was upon the Gentiles, and they did prosper and obtain the land for their inheritance; and I beheld that they were white, and exceedingly fair and beautiful, like unto my people before they were slain. ¹⁶And *I, Nephi, beheld that the Gentiles who had gone forth out of captivity did humble themselves before the Lord; and the power of the Lord was with them. ¹⁷And I beheld that their mother Gentiles were gathered together upon the waters, and upon the land also, to battle against them. ¹⁸And I beheld that the power of God was with them, and also that the wrath of God was upon all those that were gathered together against them to battle. ¹⁹And I, Nephi, beheld that the Gentiles that had gone out of captivity were delivered by the power of God out of the hands of all other nations.

meditation

For many centuries now, scholars have conducted close, “critical” examinations of Hebrew and Greek Biblical texts. Such close examination has been a mixed bag. It has brought many insights that have increased our understanding and appreciation of the Bible’s genius. It has also led to false openings that have distracted and yielded little increased understanding and appreciation.

Notwithstanding the tremendous disadvantage of not having access to the original language texts, I am sympathetic to the increased interest in reading the Book of Mormon more critically, i.e. seriously. I am sympathetic to questions of authorship and translation methodology. What we know of the Book of Mormon “translation” process is such as to convince us that it was not traditional. According to those who witnessed the process, there were times, for example, when the text was covered with cloth or was not even in the same room as Joseph recited text to his various scribes. It is impossible to know how much Joseph’s thoughts and views interplayed with those he found in the text.

Today’s reading is an example. The racism expressed, presumably, by Nephi as he spoke glowingly of “gentile” whiteness and disparagingly of Lamanite darkness sounds an awfully lot like the feelings and beliefs that nearly every American in Joseph’s day held toward their own race and native Americans. The view of America’s founding and of its revolt from English domination found in this passage sounds strikingly familiar to the views of 19th century Americans. None of this diminishes my personal appreciation for the Book of Mormon or its messages. It does, however, drive me to read all scripture, including the Book of Mormon, as seriously and carefully as it so richly deserves. It truly is one of America’s greatest treasures.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 13.²⁰⁻²³

²⁰And *I, Nephi, beheld that they did prosper in the land; and I beheld a book, and it was carried forth among them. ²¹And the angel said unto me: “Knowest thou the meaning of the book?”

²²And I said unto him: “I know not.”

²³And he said: “Behold it proceedeth out of the mouth of a Jew.”

And I, Nephi, beheld it; and he said unto me: “The book that thou beholdest is a record of the Jews, which contains the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; and it also containeth many of the prophecies of the holy prophets; and it is a record like unto the engravings which are upon the plates of brass, save there are not so many; nevertheless, they contain the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; wherefore, they are of great worth unto the Gentiles.”

meditation

In my lifetime there has been an increased emphasis on reading the Book of Mormon. I am old enough to remember how the increased emphasis came about. I am old enough to remember then President Benson utilizing DC 85.⁵⁴⁻⁵⁷ to inform Church members that we were “under condemnation” because we had “treated lightly the things you have received” and that one of those things treated lightly was the “new covenant, even the Book of Mormon.” Though the passage goes on, he stopped there for his purposes.

Now, much good has come of this increased emphasis on reading the Book of Mormon. Anything that encourages individuals to spend more and quality time in scripture is to be applauded. However, the DC passage does not end where Benson cut it off. It goes on to say “and the former commandments which I have given them.” Among the “former commandments” is certainly the Bible. It might be good, today, to bring this latter phrase—“and the former commandments”—back into awareness.

Too often, it seems, individuals have and do neglect the Bible in their daily habit of scripture reading. This is unfortunate. The Bible is, as the angel of God bears witness, “of great worth.” While not every portion of the Bible is of equal benefit and utility, it is impossible to overestimate the value and importance of the New Testament Gospels, for example. Here, we hear the words and see the actions of God through words and actions less filtered through human interpretation than anywhere else—though the filter is still present, of course. It is difficult to overestimate the value of an Isaiah (whom Jesus himself recommended for our attention), a Jeremiah, an Amos, a Psalmist, or a Paul. In my view, the Bible plumbs depths that the Book of Mormon barely acknowledges as existing.

It is important to note, however, that whatever one’s priority and preference in scripture reading, the condemnation under which the Church found itself in DC 85 was not, in fact, a consequence of an absence or lack of scripture *reading*. It was the absence of “scripture *doing*.” The saints were “not only to say” and/or read the Book of Mormon and “the former commandments” found in, among other places, the Bible, “but to *do* according to that which I have written. We want to be good readers of the word of God so that we know what it means to be good doers of the word of God. And by assisting us to know what is required to be good doers of the word, scripture inspires us to more faithfully strive to be better doers of the good found in the good word of God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 13.²⁴⁻²⁵

²⁴And the angel of the Lord said unto me: “Thou hast beheld that the book proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew; and when it proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew it contained the fulness of the gospel of the Lord, of whom the twelve apostles bear record; and they bear record according to the truth which is in the Lamb of God. ²⁵Wherefore, these things go forth from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles, according to the truth which is in God.

meditation

Antisemitism is as old as Christianity. Perhaps even older. It has waxed and waned over the centuries and millennia. It has, it seems, waxed and waned according to the policies and propaganda of societal leaders and institutions. These leaders and institutions have set the tone.

While there have always been individuals who privately held vile antisemitic attitudes, they have been kept at bay, publicly quieted, during periods, all too short lived, when societal leaders and institutions shamed such attitudes by calling them out for the evil that they are. Vile antisemitic feelings and actions have waxed, becoming more public when societal leaders and institutions have failed to name them for the evil that they are or have, themselves, engaged in antisemitic propaganda and policies.

In today’s America, public antisemitism is waxing. As usual, its ascendancy can be directly traced to societal leadership. One particular societal leader has done more for the public antisemitic revival than any other American leader in the past half century. I do not need to name him. We all know who he is. Number 45. He gave American antisemites who had been quieted for decades, shamed for their wickedness, these he gave permission to come out of the closet to reveal and express their hateful nature. Perdition is too good for such a man.

Notwithstanding the vile immorality of this man, the base of his support has come from so called “Christians.” Not surprisingly, the waxing of American antisemitism is particularly strong among so called “Christian Nationalists.” The vile irony of this fact is obvious, if tragic.

These selfsame “Christians” proclaim their love for the Bible. They proclaim their love of Jesus. But this book for which they proclaim such admiration, “proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew.” Many of them, in fact. Furthermore, “the book [that] proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew” went “forth from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles.” Jews, hundreds of them, wrote the Bible. Jews, untold thousands of them, maintained the purity of its divine message for millennia. Most ironic of all, of course, is the fact that the man whom “Christian” antisemites call “Son of God,” “Lamb of God,” indeed, “God,” himself, was a Jew.

We will read in coming verses of the impurities that gentile “Christians” introduced into the book that Jews presented them in purity. While we have reservations about the degree to which “Christianity” corrupted the Bible, we have no doubt as to the impurity of Christian attitudes and behaviors, including that found in antisemitism. These impurities of behavior, including those found in antisemitism, form the truest “Christian” impurity—often based on impure readings and interpretations of the Bible.

We cannot, then, escape the inescapable. We cannot escape the conclusion that these antisemitic, Jew-hating “Christians” of latter-day American Christendom hate the greatest Jew of them all, the truest of all Jews, Jesus of Nazareth? Refusing to be guided by the pure Biblical message and accept its message of universal sin, American “Christians” would as certainly kill their beloved Jesus as did

the Jews upon whom they heap hate. This truth is, in the end, more than ironic. It is damning.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Nephi 13.²⁶⁻²⁸

²⁶“And after they go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, from the Jews unto the Gentiles, thou seest the formation of that great and abominable church, which is most abominable above all other churches; for behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away. ²⁷And all this have they done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord, that they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men. ²⁸Wherefore, thou seest that after the book hath gone forth through the hands of the great and abominable church, that there are many plain and precious things taken away from the book, which is the book of the Lamb of God.

meditation

In a previous meditation belonging to this series, we commented on the LDS tendency, now decades long, of ignoring the Bible for the simpler and more assessable Book of Mormon. LDS skepticism of the Bible is even longer, going back to the very beginnings of Mormonism and likely finding its genesis in passages such as this one. The traditional LDS understanding of the Bible is that it was corrupted by the early Christian Church, identified with Nephi’s “great and abominable church,” in the earlier decades and centuries of the common era. There are a number of difficulties with this understanding. We will briefly address only two.

We address the first difficulty repeatedly in this series of meditation and so will spend little time with here. It is the near exclusive identification of Nephi’s “great and abominable church” with the early Christian Church, and particularly the Catholic Church. While characteristics of the “great and abominable church”—the desire for wealthy, power, and prestige—are found in the Catholic Church of all ages, as they are in the LDS Church and every other church that has ever existed, the “great and abominable church” is not to be thought synonymous with the Catholic Church or any other church. It represents any and all institutions, sacred or secular, that have as motives and reasons for their existence the acquisition of wealth, power, and prestige and use their powers to oppress in their drive to acquire, maintain, and grow in these “lustful and covetous desires.”

Thus, it is our view that any interpretation of this reading that assigns responsibility for any corruption of the Bible exclusively to the Catholic Church is wholly mistaken. This brings us to our second difficulty. Any understanding that assigns responsibility for the alleged *textual* corruption of the Bible to the Catholic Church is beyond wholly wrong—an error of the first magnitude.

We cannot present all the reasons for these assertions here. For now, we will only consider a couple of historical facts that call into question the previously mentioned difficulties.

With the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, it has become clear that the text of the Old Testament has remained largely unchanged since, at least, the 1st and 2nd centuries B.C. This means that the Christian church, of any era, has made few if any significant changes to the Old Testament text and that any changes made to the Old Testament text came at the hands of Jews before the first two centuries BC. Thus, if the Old Testament is massively and meaningfully textually corrupt, Jews, not gentiles are responsible.

Textual matters are not significantly different when we turn our attention to the New Testament. The earliest New Testament texts, text fragments, and text quotations that we possess are not significantly different from the text as we have it today. Differences are minor and not of a significant doctrinal nature. This means that if there were significant textual changes to the New Testament that created significant change to doctrine, they came almost immediately and were made by the first generation

or two of church leaders. One would expect these earliest church leaders to be more not less ardent in their determination to maintain the integrity of the text.

All of this leads us to give serious consideration to the following conclusions.

First, whatever plain and precious doctrines were lost to those gentiles who brought the Bible across the seas were lost due to the corruption of the *interpretation* of the text rather than to the corruption of the text itself. We can, therefore, read and appreciate the Bible with a high degree of confidence that we are reading it as it was written originally. It is by no means perfect. There are textual corruptions, to be sure. But they are not such that they call into question the integrity of the messages and doctrines that were originally intended. The LDS skepticism of the Bible, often mere pretense for dismissing inconvenient tensions that exist between the plain meaning of the text and LDS doctrine, is unjustified. More appreciative, confident, and discerning reading of the Bible should be the order of the day.

Now, for our second conclusion. We accept without reservation that the gentiles who crossed the seas to come to America came with a Bible whose interpretation had been corrupted by the “great and abominable church”—institutions of all sorts that took as life’s highest goals and achievements the acquisition of wealth, power, and prestige.” This leads us to the suspicion that much, if not most of the interpretive corruption that the Bible suffered involved passages and statements that addressed matters associated with the acquisition and use of wealth, power, and prestige.

Our “suspicion” turns almost to “certain conclusion” when we observe America’s obsession with all things related to wealth, power, and prestige from its very inception to this very day. Above all else, America has erred in matters related to wealth and power and prestige. One thinks of one of Alexis De Tocqueville’s many observations concerning the colonial America in which he so studiously traveled,

“I know of no country, indeed, where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men and where a profounder contempt is expressed for the theory of the permanent equality of property”¹⁶

This reality of the “gentile” American spirit is as good an example as any of the perversion that the “great and abominable church” brought to America through its perverted interpretation of that Holy Book we call the Bible.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹⁶ *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, p. 35.

1 Nephi 13.²⁹⁻³²

²⁹And after these plain and precious things were taken away it goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles; and after it goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles, yea, even across the many waters which thou hast seen with the Gentiles which have gone forth out of captivity, thou seest—because of the many plain and precious things which have been taken out of the book, which were plain unto the understanding of the children of men, according to the plainness which is in the Lamb of God—because of these things which are taken away out of the gospel of the Lamb, an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them.

³⁰Nevertheless, thou beholdest that the Gentiles who have gone forth out of captivity, and have been lifted up by the power of God above all other nations, upon the face of the land which is choice above all other lands, which is the land that the Lord God hath covenanted with thy father that his seed should have for the land of their inheritance; wherefore, thou seest that the Lord God will not suffer that the Gentiles will utterly destroy the mixture of thy seed, which are among thy brethren. ³¹Neither will he suffer that the Gentiles shall destroy the seed of thy brethren. ³²Neither will the Lord God suffer that the Gentiles shall forever remain in that awful state of blindness, which thou beholdest they are in, because of the plain and most precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb which have been kept back by that abominable church, whose formation thou hast seen.

meditation

We have suggested that there is very little evidence that the Bible which the gentiles turned Americas brought across the seas was textually corrupted by the Catholic Church, or anyone else for that matter. Rather, the corruption responsible for “taking away” “plain and precious things” from the Bible was interpretive and based on false traditions of Biblical interpretation. These false interpretations were propagated by the “great and abominable church” which was all human institutions, sacred and secular, that prioritized the accumulation and growth of wealth, power, and prestige. With their having this triumvirate of idolatrous gods as their highest priority, these institutions worked diligently to confuse and stifle Biblical interpretations that focused, among other things, on the evils of this triumvirate of gods. They managed to leave Americans with their corrupted interpretive traditions with a Bible they could use to justify abject materialism, inequality, and the oppression, such as slavery, that was used to achieve their evil lustful ends.

Today’s passage provides indications of the success of these devious, even Satanic machinations. Speaking of gentiles turned Americans, Nephi informs us that “because of these things which are taken away out of the gospel of the Lamb, an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them.”

Nephi understands the hand of God to have been in the coming of gentiles to America and their success in throwing off the yoke of tyrannical European monarchy. We find in this a rhetoric that simply sees God as an active participant in every aspect of human life at every moment. While we do not accept such rhetoric as literal and cosmos, we’ll just let it slide for now.

But what is very, very clear, unquestionably so, is that, having arrived in America, these gentiles “stumbled.” And not only so, their stumbling was “exceedingly great.” And the *exceedingly great* stumbling was not an isolated phenomenon. “Many” did stumble. American society itself was stumbling about in a darkness manufactured by those institutions that had corrupted the Bible and, among other evils, made a virtue out of vice—made a virtue of the lust for wealth, power, and prestige, and happily entered the great and spacious building. Indeed, the darkness was so complete that the gentiles turned Americas were in an “awful state of blindness.” I don’t know what the difference is between blindness and “awful” blindness, but whatever it is, America’s blind state fell

into the latter category of *awful*.

Such exceeding great stumbling and such awful blindness granted “Satan” an opportunity to have “great power over them.” Satan did not simply hold way in America, he gripped it tightly by the neck. He had “*great*” power over the nation. He was as much in charge as anyone or anything. America looked to him for deliverance.

Don’t blame the messenger. I am simply repeating what Nephi saw in vision.

The Satanic inspired stumbling was great and multifaceted. Among the many American evils was the early and oft-repeated murder of the indigenous populations that the gentile Americans found inconvenient, a stumbling block to their goals of acquiring more wealth and more power and more prestige. God, according to Nephi, foresaw the butchery. But, prediction should not be thought of as or be confused with prescription. God did not prescribe it. He did not direct it. He did not command it. He did not condone it. Murder and genocide are a human labor, not a divine one.

God’s labor, whatever form it takes, is to save and advance life. And so God set to work to see that the gentiles failed in their intents and actions to “utterly destroy” the indigenous populations. No matter how hard or how often the gentiles turned Americans tried to exterminate the indigenous peoples—and they did work often and hard at it—their labors would not be successful.

In the next reading, we will see a part of God’s labor in behalf of the indigenous peoples of America. As we think of God’s labor to deliver them, we are reminded of that which an ancient pack of Egyptian slaves who were oppressed and threatened with genocide discovered about God. He is an emancipator. He cares much for the downtrodden. He comes to their rescue. If and when mortals refuse to step forward and labor with Him, then He stretched out His powerful arm and does His own work all by Himself. Lord help such an obstinate, stumbling, blinded people, society, or nation.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

2 Nephi 25.^{23, 26-27}

²³For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.

²⁶And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins. Wherefore, we speak concerning the law that our children may know the deadness of the law; and they, by knowing the deadness of the law, may look forward unto that life which is in Christ...

meditation

“You need to know, the law will kill you.” How’s that for an opening gambit in an inspiring FHE lesson? It is a lesson that Nephites often taught their children.

“Oh, trust me,” Nephi says, “We speak to our children about the law. Like you, we can go on and on and on about it, almost ad nauseum. But, we do not go on and on and on as you probably imagine, or even as you do. We do not tell them how salvific it is. No, ‘we speak concerning the law that our children may know the deadness of the law.’ We tell them to do as well as they can, to be the best they can be, but to never think they will satisfy the law’s requirements or, at least, feel that they are satisfying the law’s requirements. Even when they have done their very best, it will not be enough, at least in their minds—‘I could have, should have done better.’”

“One of our most famous kings, said it like this: ‘If ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants.’”¹⁷

“Maybe, then, you understand why we go on and on and on about Christ. Why we write about Christ. Why we talk of Christ. Why we rejoice in Christ. Why we preach of Christ. Why we prophesy of Christ. Because as much as our children need to know what they are supposed to do, they need even more to know what to do when they haven’t done all that they know they are supposed to do. The latter will feel more frequent than the former. So, yes, we rejoice in Christ. You should too, for the same reason. And again, I say, ‘Rejoice.’”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹⁷ Mosiah 2.²¹

Jacob 1.⁸

Wherefore, we would to God that we could persuade all men not to rebel against God, to provoke him to anger, but that all men would believe in Christ, and view his death, and suffer his cross and bear the shame of the world...

Meditation 1

Though I had probably read it dozens of times, it was sometime in my early thirties when I really read, really heard, and then faithfully acted upon the profound admonition That Nephi's little brother, Jacob, extended to his hearers: "View his death."

There is no doubt that for many readers of the Book of Mormon, Jacob, the brother of Nephi lives in the shadow of his more famous brother. Yet, Nephi thinks highly of his younger brother and his gospel insights. Even in the second book that bears Nephi's name, five chapters are devoted to Jacob's teachings and instruction (2 Nephi 6-10). In fact, Jacob's inspired teachings with their high dependence upon and use of Isaiah seem to have inspired Nephi to include fifteen chapters from Isaiah in his own work.

Nephi, confessing that he had seen "my Redeemer," like Isaiah had, also informs us, "my brother, Jacob, also has seen him as I have seen him" (See 2 Ne. 11.²⁻³). We cannot say for sure what either of these men saw. However, perhaps Jacob's admonition provides a clue.

In the first chapter of his book, Jacob tells us of his constant admonition of his people. He admonished them "to come unto Christ, and partake of the goodness of God." He admonished them "not to rebel against God, to provoke him to anger." He admonished them to "suffer his [Jesus'] cross and bear the shame of the world." Tucked in with these admonitions, is this one: Jacob admonished his people to "view his [Christ's] death" (See Ja. 1.⁷⁻⁸).

Think about this final admonition. Think about the importance of the event—of Jesus' death by crucifixion—that Jacob would admonish his people view it.

In April of 1829 as Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were starting their project of translating the Book of Mormon, they received their own admonition. It is a personal invitation from the Lord Jesus himself: "Behold the wounds which pierced my side, and also the prints of the nails in my hands and feet" (See DC 6.^{34 & 37}). This admonition is not unlike that that Jacob delivered.

As Lent ends and we enter the commemoration of the Savior's final week—Holy Week, as it is called in Christendom—Jacob's admonition to his listeners and the Savior's own invitation to Joseph and Oliver seem especially pertinent. It is the time of times to do more than *remember*, but to labor to *view* with an eye of faith Jesus's final week, his death on the cross, and "the wounds which pierced [his] side," and "the prints of the nails in [his] hands and feet."

Such viewing is not sensationalistic. It is not grotesque or macabre. It is saving and redeeming; for, as Paul bears witness, "The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1.¹⁸). So, go ahead. Close your eyes. And let the past become present. Step up and stand at the foot of the cross. Look upon his battered body. Marvel at his unconquerable spirit. And *view his death*.

It may be that of all our admonitions over the course of this Lent season, this three-word admonition is the most important and transformative of them all. And not only are they of the utmost importance

for Lent and Easter. They are of the utmost importance for every time.

View his death.

You will not regret the effort. I, for one, have never viewed anything more magnificent. So, go ahead.
View his death!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 21, 2024)

meditation 2

During his lifetime, Jacob, the better known of Nephi's two younger brothers and successor to Nephi's record keeping ways, "labored diligently" with others in the work of persuasion. In Jacob 1.⁷, Jacob tells us of his labor in persuading his people "to come unto Christ and partake of the goodness of God, that they might enter into his rest, lest by any means he should swear in his wrath they should not enter in, as in the provocation in the days of temptation while the children of Israel were in the wilderness."

In our meditation's titular passage, Jacob returns to the theme of provoking God. He hopes to not only persuade his own people but "all men not to rebel against God, to provoke him to anger." Jacob's following conjoining, "but," informs us what the opposite of rebellion against God looks like and thus how to avoid God's anger or wrath. Put more positively, the conjunction informs us of the nature of fealty to God. Fealty to God entails believing "in Christ." While Jacob's list is certainly not all encompassing, he lists three ways we witness our belief in Christ. We demonstrate our belief in Christ when we 1) "view his death," 2) "suffer his cross," and 3) "bear the shame of the world." These three things constitute Jacob's thoughts on what fealty to God is.

It is perhaps too obvious to say that, here, belief in Christ is bound up with the death and shame he suffered on the cross." So much for belittling the cross of Christ. We are to view his death. His death and remembrance of it are to be central and permanent pillars upon which our faith in Christ are evident and expressed.

Then too, we are to "suffer his cross." So much for the cross being simply a sign of a dying and a dead God. Here, the cross becomes a sign for a way of LIFE. It is a symbol for how disciples live. Disciples of Christ live doing what Jesus did in suffering and dying on the cross. And what Jesus did in dying on the cross is what he had done throughout his earthly life. From the time of his birth and throughout his ministry, Jesus bore "the shame of the world." Jesus bore the shame of the world because he rejected and resisted in every moment in all things the world's wicked and dehumanizing values—values nearly always upheld through violence. Jesus' disciples are to live the same life of rejection of and resistance to the world's value system so inimical to an enduring and progressive life.

There is so very much here, so very much in the sign of the cross that it is difficult to know where to begin. But, as before, we must start somewhere, so we will start with the obvious.

Obviously, the cross is an ultimate sign of violence. In suffering the violence of the cross, Jesus exposed the wickedness and injustice of the world's near constant resort to violence. In suffering his cross, Jesus also resisted the world's belief in and use of violent force to achieve one's ends. One of the world's values is to win at any cost. If and when all else fails, this drive to win often—more probably, nearly always—entails the use of force and violence. Jesus announced his rejection of

violent force the evening before his crucifixion. When the cowardly mob came to arrest him, and his own disciples appealed to him to resist arrest through forceful violence, Jesus refused.

“Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?”¹⁸

Jesus was true to his word the following day. He did not yield to the worldly temptation of violent force even in the defense of his own life. He would not use it to further his ends, no matter how right and glorious his ends might be. The cross, then, is a sign of his rejection and resistance to violence.

But the cross is not only a sign of Jesus’ rejection of violence. The cross is a sign to be picked up and born by Jesus’ disciples. It is a sign of their discipleship in following his example in rejecting and resisting the world’s lie that violence is inevitable, enlivening, and enduring.

Related to the rejection of violence is the bearing of “the shame of the world.” The world is ashamed and scandalized, of course, by those who will not pick up the sword and use violence to further ends—their own or the group’s—deemed to be “holy. The cross, then, is a sign of Jesus’ and our own willingness to endure shame rather than yield to the world’s violent values. But bearing the shame of the world runs further and deeper than the rejection of violence.

When we think of the shame Jesus suffered on the cross, we again think first of the obvious. We think of the physical shame of hanging on the cross. We think of the shame of having his body exposed, everyone looking upon his nakedness as he lost control of his body and all bodily functions. We think too on the emotional shame of being thought of as defeated, exposed as a fraud and failure.

“He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him...”¹⁹

Think of the shame in being rejected by society and considered a criminal, disloyal to whatever the world has whimsically determined to be of value. Now, we like to say that Jesus was without sin. And so he was. But, throughout his life, Jesus was guilty of resisting and violating worldly principles and values. This made him a criminal in the eyes of the world. In crucifying Jesus, the world displayed in the most certain terms possible that it was ashamed of him. It was ashamed of the way he had always resisted its “charms.” He had stood up, for example, for segments of society that were deemed shameful: the poor, the publican, the leper, the female, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the possessed, and, yes, the sinner. The world found vulnerability shameful. But Jesus embraced it. By embracing it, he transformed it. This, of course, is consistent with the intuition of his own mother, Mary.

“He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.”²⁰

We might think of the opposite of shame as pride. We know what the world take’s pride in. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Book of Mormon where the world is depicted as a great and spacious

¹⁸ Matthew 26.⁵²⁻⁵³

¹⁹ Matthew 27.⁴²⁻⁴³

²⁰ Luke 1.⁵²⁻⁵³

building. The world's pride is wealth and power and prestige. In other words, the world's shame is poverty and vulnerability and commonness. The world shames those who resist its perverted value system devoted to wealth, power, and prestige. The world takes pride in the acquisition of such by any means necessary—means that are most often disrespectful and demeaning to the value of the individual and violent toward the individual's wellbeing.

Jesus lived resisting the wicked, violent, and destructive values of this world. Violence, yes. But also the wicked propaganda concerning wealth, power, and prestige. For his resistance, Jesus suffered the cross and bore “the shame of the world.” The cross is a sign of Jesus' faithfulness in bearing the shame of the world; in rejecting and resisting all that the world takes pride in. The cross is, then, as we have said repeatedly, a sign that signifies life as much as it does death. The cross is less about how Jesus died and more about how he lived.

But, further, the cross signifies the life to which any and every disciple of Jesus is called. This life is the same life Jesus lived. It is a life of resistance to and rejection of the world's perverted values in which it takes pride. It is a life of resistance and rejection, knowing full well that this resistance and rejection will bring the world's shame.

This cross can be a heavy load to bear. But if we would be disciples of Jesus, we must live the life of the cross and suffer the world's shame as Jesus did. This is how we war against the world. There can be no peaceful coexistence with it or its perversions.

Yes, we are to live with crosses. We are to bear crosses. However shameful.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

jacob 2.¹⁷

Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you.

meditation

Jesus speaks about our treatment of others in terms of the “neighbor.” His expectations are very high. Jacob, on the other hand, speaks of our treatment of others in terms of ourselves and the “brother,” or family member. We are to consider others and treat others—specifically the vulnerable poor—as we would be treated and as we would treat our own family members. Most of us are “free” and “familiar” in our spending for our personal needs and wants. We are also often “free” and “familiar” in distributing our economic resources to family members. Parents, for example, often spend many years of labor and give much thought to leaving their children an inheritance. They do so in hopes that their children will be as well off, if not better off than they.

This is the sort of attitude toward vulnerable members of society that the Lord expects of those who would call themselves disciples of Jesus. In assisting others, our goal is not only to alleviate suffering. Our goal is to bring the disadvantaged up to our level.

Such a familiar attitude toward our fellow citizens—“brethren,” by Jacob’s reckoning—not only dictates one’s personal and private activities in relation to the poor, it also dictates the political leaders one votes for and the public policies one supports.

When we consider the private behavior of individuals, and the economic policies of the nation in light of the Lord’s economic expectations as Jacob outlines them, it seems that we must conclude America to be in violation of godly economic principles and in open rebellion against God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Mosiah 4.²⁶⁻²⁷

²⁶And now, for the sake of these things which I have spoken unto you—that is, for the sake of retaining a remission of your sins from day to day, that ye may walk guiltless before God—I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants. ²⁷And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength. And again, it is expedient that he should be diligent, that thereby he might win the prize; therefore, all things must be done in order.

meditation

In addition to being a season of self-reflection, confession, and repentance, Lent is a season of alms giving. Today's passage talks a bit about that. It would, of course, be wrong-headed to hear King Benjamin's admonition that we "impart our substance to the poor" "for the sake of retaining a remission of sins" as the primary reason for caring for those less advantaged than us.

To be motivated out of personal gain in this way would be like imagining that as Jesus carried his cross to Calvary he was considering all the blessings that would flow to him because of his willing sacrifice. I suspect that if we believed that Jesus acted out of such self-interest we might lose a tad of respect for him and his sacrifice. But it is highly doubtful that many if any of us imagine Jesus having such thoughts. Rather, we might imagine him thinking of the blessing that would flow to others because of his willing sacrifice. We might even like to think that maybe our name or our face flashed through his mind as he considered the benefits that would come to those who applied his atonement in their lives. We might even imagine him offering a short prayer in which he pleaded that we would accept his generous gift.

So, during Lent, as always, we care for the poor, not because of the benefits that come to us but because of the benefits it brings to others. We care for the poor because it is the right thing to do. We care for the poor because it is the Christ-like thing to do. We care for the poor because we love others the way Jesus loves us. We care for the poor even if we do not receive one red cent's worth of blessings. We care for the poor because it is simply in our natures to be Christ-like.

It is true, though, that alms giving during Lent, or any other time, is an excellent way to remind ourselves of Christ's love for us. As we see, acknowledge, and act upon the needs of others, we are reminded of our own dire needs and how Jesus has so generously met and continues to meet those needs. We are reminded how respectfully he saw, acknowledged, and treated us in our need. We are reminded how he refused then and refuses now to throw our need in our face, and to offer harsh judgement. We are reminded how careful he is with us; how hard he works to help us maintain a sense of self-worth.

We rejoice in being able to be a Christ-like figure in other's lives, however inadequate our efforts might be. We rejoice in helping in such a manner that others not only feel our love and respect and honor and high valuation of them, but also feel such love and respect and honor and high valuation flowing into their lives from the greatest servants of all; the greatest servants the universe has ever witnessed: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 23, 2024)

Mosiah 15.¹⁻⁴

¹And now Abinadi said unto them: I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. ²And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son—³the Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son—⁴and they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth.

meditation

This reading has been a source of much discussion, debate, and confusion. Much of the confusion comes, it seems, from trying to force it to address issues that it was never intended to address. If Abinadi is who the tradition claims him to be—a prophet living in 2nd century BC America and speaking to a live audience that sat before him and whose misunderstandings he was attempting to enlighten and to whose needs he ministered—it seems inappropriate to read and handle this reading as if it were some sort of commentary on the triune Godhead. It certainly clarifies nothing about that long-lasting Christian debate. Rather, it muddies things up even more.

It seems best, then, to understand it as addressing another matter. What is that matter? Here, Abinadi is offering insight into the nature of Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament and of the Book of Mormon. His central point—and one that seems to have gone unappreciated by Old Testament prophets—is that Jesus/ the Messiah/ the Son of God and the God, Yahweh, were the same Being.

Think of it. Think of all the glory, and understanding, and power that the Old Testament ascribes to Him. They are infinite. And yet, according to Abinadi's witness, this glorious Being, laid it all aside. Became mortal. Experienced limitations that, at times, caused all sorts of pain, suffering, and humiliation. Perhaps to some degree, powerlessness. Truly it is a marvel. Unfathomable to me. But, I am no less in awe of Him for all my perplexity and confusion.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Mosiah 15.⁵⁻⁷

⁵And thus the flesh becoming subject to the Spirit, or the Son to the Father, being one God, suffereth temptation, and yieldeth not to the temptation, but suffereth himself to be mocked, and scourged, and cast out, and disowned by his people. ⁶And after all this, after working many mighty miracles among the children of men, he shall be led, yea, even as Isaiah said, as a sheep before the shearer is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. ⁷Yea, even so he shall be led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father.

meditation

After establishing that the disembodied God, Yahweh, and the embodied Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God, were the same Being, Abinadi turns his attention to the sort of life to which the glorious Yahweh willingly submitted himself in entering mortality. He was “mocked, and scourged, and cast out, and disowned by his people.” The Lion of the Tribe of Judah was “led” (notice the passive voice) “as a sheep before the shearer.” Having been sheared, he was then “led” (once more passive) to the slaughter through crucifixion.

Notwithstanding the pain and humiliation of it all, Jesus never wavered but followed the desires, the intents, the plans that he had made as Yahweh and while sitting on his divine throne in heaven. In so doing, he revealed the character of God. He revealed a character that would go to any lengths to touch humans and draw them to Himself. He would go to any lengths to assist in their understanding of the kinds of Beings that lived and endured in the universe. He would go to any length to help them advance in their own character such that they too might live and endure in a very large, very complex, and very diverse universe. Here, tabernacled in clay as He, we learn the elementary lessons that will allow us to live and endure in this very challenging universe.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Mosiah 15.¹⁰⁻¹³

¹⁰And now I say unto you, who shall declare his generation?

Behold, I say unto you, that when his soul has been made an offering for sin he shall see his seed. And now what say ye? And who shall be his seed?

¹¹Behold I say unto you, that whosoever has heard the words of the prophets, yea, all the holy prophets who have prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord—I say unto you, that all those who have hearkened unto their words, and believed that the Lord would redeem his people, and have looked forward to that day for a remission of their sins, I say unto you, that these are his seed, or they are the heirs of the kingdom of God. ¹²For these are they whose sins he has borne; these are they for whom he has died, to redeem them from their transgressions.

And now, are they not his seed? ¹³Yea, and are not the prophets, every one that has opened his mouth to prophesy, that has not fallen into transgression, I mean all the holy prophets ever since the world began?

I say unto you that they are his seed.

meditation

To live the kind of enduring life that God lives, i.e., to be God's seed, we must adopt the principles of an enduring life by which He and all other enduring beings live. Because these principles are so diametrically opposed to the principles of this world, these principles of endurance can be difficult to grasp and even harder to live and incorporate into our being.

This effort, the labor of sanctification, is a lifetime effort that is universally incomplete at the time of death. But, we must embark of the journey. In order to make progress on this life journey—while not reaching the destination—we will require assistance. Supernatural aid, if you will. We will need God's participation in our lives. But, we will need to believe in that participation and in God's willingness to participate in our messy lives.

The first step in our having faith in God's willing and eager participation in our lives is experiencing His presence and participation through the remission of sins that God so gracefully bestows. This comes, of course, at our most vulnerable and sinful state. When we see His willingness to enter into even this, the worse of our moments, we can easily believe that He will enter into our better, though still imperfect moments as we strive for sanctification—to become an enduring individual, God's seed.

It will not do, then, to put off the day of the remission of sins. We must receive it today. To not do so, is to begin the journey of sanctification without having the key to success—knowledge that God willingly and eagerly is with us and aids us in our imperfect labors to become an enduring being and living with Him and other enduring beings. It is like starting a trip on foot that requires a rocket ship. This experience of receiving a remission of sins and thus knowing of God's willing presence in our lives as we proceed toward becoming an enduring being is what it means to “follow the prophet.” This is the true meaning of being the seed of God, or the children of God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Mosiah 15.¹⁴⁻¹⁹

¹⁴And these are they who have published peace,
who have brought good tidings of good,
who have published salvation;
and said unto Zion: Thy God reigneth!

¹⁵And O how beautiful upon the mountains were their feet!

¹⁶And again, how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those that are still publishing peace!

¹⁷And again, how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who shall hereafter publish peace,
yea, from this time henceforth and forever!

And behold, I say unto you, this is not all.

¹⁸For O how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings,
that is the founder of peace,

yea, even the Lord, who has redeemed his people;

yea, him who has granted salvation unto his people;

¹⁹For were it not for the redemption which he hath made for his people,
which was prepared from the foundation of the world,

I say unto you, were it not for this,

all mankind must have perished.

Meditation

We began our Advent/Christmas readings and meditations with Isaiah's promise of comfort so appropriate to the Christmas Season.

“Comfort ye,
comfort ye my people, saith your God.
Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem,
and cry unto her,
that her warfare is accomplished,
that her iniquity is pardoned...”

In today's reading, the great Book of Mormon prophet, Abinadi, turns to that same Isaiah for a word of comfort and peace. The word of comfort and peace that he finds is, “Thy God reigneth!”

Many speak and promise of this reign, but it is Jesus, himself, who most clearly announces the glad tidings, “Thy God reigneth.” Indeed, it is he who is the “the *founder of peace*” and the founder of God's reign. This message of the reign of God could easily represent the core message and purpose of Jesus' earthly ministry. Mark records that upon leaving his forty-day ordeal in the wilderness, Jesus, as the first public act and statement of his ministry,

“came into Galilee, heralding God's good news, saying that the time has arrived and God's reign has drawn near. Turn your mind to and believe the good news”²¹

So many have reigned on earth. So many kingdoms have come and gone. All of them have been controlled and directed by values, ambitions, and desires that served to discomfort, divide, oppress,

²¹ Mark 1. ¹⁴⁻¹⁵; author's translation. Jesus invites his audience to turn away from being ruled by this world and its values to being ruled by God and His values. This will, of course, entail a change in values and behaviors, but this change will come because individuals give entrance to God's instructions and partake of God's power.

and even kill. This was the message of John the Revelator's four horsemen of the apocalypse. This was the message of the great and spacious building found in Lehi's dream and the angel's explanatory visions to Nephi. We must turn from these rebelling nations and kingdoms that bellow their pride so loudly. We must follow the humble, the meek, the mild Jesus into his Father's peaceful kingdom.

So, Isaiah's look forward and Jesus' heralding, "Thy God reigneth," is good news indeed. For those in whose personal life God reigns as he does in Zion, every season is a season of peace and comfort. The Christmas Season is a particularly good season to celebrate the peaceful reign of God, for it is in many ways the traditional season during which the peaceful reign of God was founded. "Behold," promised a heavenly angel,

"I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."²²

Then, "suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.'²³

Where would we be without him? Abinadi has the answer. Were it not for him, we, with "all mankind must have perished." But we do not perish because Jesus initiated the reign or the kingdom of God into our lives so that He might take control. It is not only Jesus' feet that are beautiful, but every inch of him. His beauty is "far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty."²⁴

What search could possibly compare with and be worthy of our greatest labors more than the search that ends in the discovery and experience of the peaceful reign of the most beautiful of all beings, now and forever.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

²² Luke 2.¹⁰⁻¹¹

²³ Luke 2.¹³⁻¹⁴

²⁴ 1 Nephi 11.⁸

Mosiah 16.³⁻⁷

³For they are carnal and devilish, and the devil has power over them; yea, even that old serpent that did beguile our first parents, which was the cause of their fall; which was the cause of all mankind becoming carnal, sensual, devilish, knowing evil from good, subjecting themselves to the devil. ⁴Thus all mankind were lost; and behold, they would have been endlessly lost were it not that God redeemed his people from their lost and fallen state. ⁵But remember that he that persists in his own carnal nature, and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion against God, remaineth in his fallen state and the devil hath all power over him. Therefore, he is as though there was no redemption made, being an enemy to God; and also is the devil an enemy to God.

⁶And now if Christ had not come into the world, speaking of things to come as though they had already come, there could have been no redemption. ⁷And if Christ had not risen from the dead, or have broken the bands of death that the grave should have no victory, and that death should have no sting, there could have been no resurrection.

meditation

It has become fashionable in LDS theology and culture—seemingly supported by certain temple theatrical screenplays and performances—to portray Eve’s choice to partake of the fruit as an enlightened, well-thought out decision. One suspects that this is more a reflection of the culture’s attempt to deflect from its own increasingly recognized institutional misogyny than a trustworthy theological insight. It certainly seems at odds with the Book that the culture claims is the “most correct.” Today’s passage is but one data point reflective of that tension.

One can claim that “blaming” Eve was, itself, misogynistic in the first place. Very well. But, say that. Don’t create an unverifiable alternative explanation that does not possess one iota of scriptural justification.

Abinadi understands that “our first parents”—plural, man and woman—were “beguiled.” They were deceived, tricked. Their decision to eat the fruit was not enlightened, though their later reflections upon their experience were. They were duped into believing and acting upon something that was not so— a blatant Satanic lie.

They were enlightened enough, it is claimed, to know eating the fruit meant “man might be” and that it opened new avenues of choice. But what kind of “man” did their choice produce? On this, the Book of Mormon is consistent and unambiguous. The couple’s choice to eat the fruit brought into being creatures who would become subject to the Devil. This subjugation would bring about a race that is “carnal, sensual, and devilish.” It would bring about not one, but innumerable “lost” generations and billions of lost souls. Amulek, perhaps, put it as well as anyone ever has in his uncompromising indictment of humankind.

“For 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, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish; yea, *all are hardened; yea, all are fallen and are lost, and must perish except it be through the atonement* which it is expedient should be made” (Alma 34.⁹).

The new fangled version of “women’s liberation” reflected in the new LDS view of Eve is not potent enough to erase the Church’s institutional misogyny. At the same time, it diminishes, at least for this carnal, sensual, and devilish man, the punch that Jesus’ atonement carries with it.

It is one thing for Jesus to redeem a few noble, enlightened souls who mildly, almost passively, “transgress.” It is a whole other story, and far more impressive and impressionable for him to redeem souls that have subjected themselves, by choice, to the Devil and have become lost in a carnal, sensual, and devilish life. It is the second of these two Redeemers with whom I am most experientially familiar. The first draws a big yawn and induces little awe and gratitude. The second makes me want to jump and shout, “Hallelujah.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Mosiah 29.^{17, 21-23}

¹⁷For behold, how much iniquity doth one wicked king cause to be committed, yea, and what great destruction!

²¹And behold, now I say unto you, ye cannot dethrone an iniquitous king save it be through much contention, and the shedding of much blood. ²²For behold, he has his friends in iniquity, and he keepeth his guards about him; and he teareth up the laws of those who have reigned in righteousness before him; and he trampleth under his feet the commandments of God; ²³And he enacteth laws, and sendeth them forth among his people, yea, laws after the manner of his own wickedness; and whosoever doth not obey his laws he causeth to be destroyed; and whosoever doth rebel against him he will send his armies against them to war, and if he can he will destroy them; and thus an unrighteous king doth pervert the ways of all righteousness.

meditation

This meditation might better be called a diatribe. But, my, my, my, my. If we ever wondered or questioned this scriptural witness, the eruption of new evils into the American body politic has once and for all convinced us of its absolute accuracy and truth. We can easily “behold how much iniquity doth one wicked *president* cause to be committed.”

Even after he was defeated in the most secure election in American history, he continued to stir, as he did while in office, “much contention” by unleashing an incessant flood of damnable lies. We witness his “friends in iniquity,” found, among other places, in the US House of Representatives. They, for the love of power, first joined him in casting doubt on the election, then attempted to overthrow the will of the voters. To this very day, they fear to stand up to him and his lies, but, instead, parrot his madness and obstruct legitimate investigations into his seditious actions.

We have stood as witnesses to the innumerable ways that he—before, during and after his governance—has “torn up the laws of those who have [governed] in righteousness before him.” We have watched him attempt to corrupt the electoral process by creating fraudulent electoral college delegates, by attempting to bully, intimidate, and corrupt election officials, and by encouraging blinded and violent insurrectionists.

Having at the very least broken every single one of the Ten Commandments in his debauched personal life, “he trampleth under his feet the commandments of God.” We see how “he enacteth laws, and sendeth them forth among his people, yea, laws after the manner of his own wickedness.” We watch in near disbelief as he and his “friends in iniquity” seek to intimidate through violence and threaten to destroy through imprisonment and other ungodly authoritarian practices the righteous who, refusing “to obey his laws,” newfangled norms, and defiled morals, seek to oppose and check his corruption.

Yes, in America’s 45th president we have seen the reincarnation of the sort of wicked, iniquitous, contentious, blinding, and destructive governance that the Book of Mormon author’s so much feared and despised, and against which they bore solemn testimony. Few, if any, in American political history have come close to the level of wickedness found in this sorry excuse of a human being, though there are now a handful who show real potential. So, what are we to do in such dark times? The fight is far, far from over.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 7.⁷

For behold, I say unto you there be many things to come; and behold, there is one thing which is of more importance than they all—for behold, the time is not far distant that the Redeemer liveth and cometh among his people.

meditation

Many billions of individuals and an unimaginable number of historical events—many of them world-shaping and world-changing—have come and gone since Alma offered his estimation of what was for him future human history. Given all that has transpired in the past two thousand years, Alma’s assessment is truly extraordinary. Each of us must pass our own judgement about the accuracy of his estimation that Jesus and his earthly ministry possess more significance for humankind than any other individual or event. But it is hard to argue that Jesus has shaped human history more than anyone.

So, that’s Alma’s evaluation of human history at the macro-level. But there is a micro-level of human history, which is history at the individual level. It could be argued that how the individual responds to Jesus is more important than their response to any other thing or person. Alma’s evaluation shaped my own responses.

When I was eighteen years old, I had earned several thousand dollars. The plan was for this money to be used to finance an LDS mission. Each day as I rode my bike back and forth to work, I passed a car dealership. There was a beautiful red Pontiac Firebird sitting on the lot. Over the course of several days, I stopped to look at the car and imagine what it would be like to own it. As I checked the sticker price, I found that I had enough money to purchase the car. With each look of the car, my desire for the it grew.

One evening my inclination to buy the car had reached its height. It just so happened that on that very night, I was reading in Alma when I came to this verse. As I read, I sensed the truth of Alma’s witness. Jesus, I sensed, would be the most important influence in my life. He would shape me and who I would be far more than the car. To serve him would be the ultimate privilege. Though I passed that same car dealership with that same car a couple more evenings, it never had the same appeal that it had previously. For two years, I served him the best I knew how. The experiences of those two years completely reshaped my life and set me on a path that I had never and could never have imagined.

“There is,” indeed, “one thing which is of more importance than” anything else in history—at both its macro and micro level. That is the coming of the Redeemer into the world and the entrance of the redeemer into the life of the individual. We must each decide for ourselves who and what is most important to us, who and what holds the greatest potential to make us the very best we can be, and who and what will make us of the most benefit to the people and the world around us. We demonstrate our decision every second of our lives by how we utilize each precious second and resource we are given, and by how diligently, how carefully, how ponderously, and how solemnly we seek the influence and presence of Jesus, the Redeemer, in our lives.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 26.¹⁶

Therefore, let us glory, yea, we will glory in the Lord; yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full; yea, we will praise our God forever. Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord? Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy, and of his long-suffering towards the children of men? Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.

meditation

introduction

Suppose (səpōz')

v. 1. To think or imagine to oneself as true. 2. To assume. 3. To expect or anticipate.

Today, we would like to talk about one of the great, most precious of human gifts—imagination. To begin, I am going to imagine. I will imagine that I am informed that, after a life time of devoted and joyous scripture study, I will soon lose my memory of everything that I have ever read, thought, felt, or discovered in scripture. However, as an act of grace, I will be allowed to choose one scripture that will remain forever in my memory. I will never forget what it says, what it means, what I learn, and what I feel when I consider its message.

Tall task, huh? You may be wondering right now which you would choose. There are so many to choose from. But, I know, already, almost before the messenger has finished. I know which one I will carry ever with me in my mind.

But, before the big reveal, a little context.

The wicked sons of Mosiah, you will recall, were with Alma at the time of his conversion. Transformed, like Alma, by their encounter with the angel, they renounced all claims to the Nephite throne, choosing, rather, to leave their homeland and evangelize among their nation's feared and hated enemy, the Lamanites.²⁵ You will also remember that through a fourteen year-long mission they brought "thousands of souls unto repentance," and changed, really, the course of Nephite and Lamanite history. But what, at the outset, did these royal sons and the nation they left behind *suppose* would happen? What did they expect from their ministry?

supposition and imagination

First, the nation: "They laughed [the sons of Mosiah] to scorn," saying, "Do ye *suppose* that ye can bring the Lamanites to the knowledge of the truth? Do ye *suppose* that ye can convince the Lamanites of the incorrectness of the traditions of their fathers?" Having displayed such a lack of imagination, the Nephite people proposed that they "take up arms against them [the Lamanites], that we destroy them and their iniquity."²⁶

What, on the other hand, did these bold sons *suppose*? We'll let one of them, Ammon, be their spokesman. "We *supposed* that our joy would be full if perhaps we could be the means of saving some." If his "some" sounds to you like "few," you would, it seems, be right. They came to the Lamanites "with the intent that perhaps [they] might save some few of their souls." Ammon acknowledges that they had been bold in their purposing, but small in their *supposing*. "Could we

²⁵ See, for example, Alma 17.⁶

²⁶ Alma 26.²³⁻²⁵

have *supposed*... that God would have granted unto us such great blessings?”²⁷ It seems that a big “NO!” is called for in answer to this question.

As you can see, there is a great deal of *supposing* going on in Alma 26, all of it puny in comparison with the reality. But there is yet one more supposition mentioned in the chapter. This one goes a long way in explaining the discrepancy between supposition and reality. Again, Ammon is spokesman.

“Who could have *supposed* that our God would have been so merciful as to have snatched us from our awful, sinful, and polluted state?”²⁸

This question, of course, is rhetorical. It assumes but one answer, “No one! No one would have thought God’s mercy so expansive!” Well, actually, someone had imagined it. Perhaps Mosiah’s sons did not have the advantage of the Psalmist’s witness.

“For as the heaven is high above the earth,
so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.
As far as the east is from the west,
so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.”²⁹

Notwithstanding the many testimonies given of him, I, too, once lacked imagination. I could not suppose that he would accept me. I supposed that I was too dirty. Too sinful. But I discovered that he was not kidding when he invited, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”³⁰

“This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him,
and saved him out of all his troubles.”³¹

What I saw that day when he proved to me his earnestness in inviting and his power in removing the trouble of sin left me speechless then and leaves me speechless still. If I hadn’t experienced it myself, I might not believe it even now. There are simply no words to describe the Being I met that afternoon in my “secret closet.” Human imagination is not big enough.

“Great is our Lord, and of great power:
His understanding is infinite.”³²

the big reveal

Thus, the one passage I wish to carry always with me, now and into eternity and beyond.

“Therefore, let us glory,
yea, we will glory in the Lord;
yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full;
yea, we will praise our God forever.
Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord?”

²⁷ See Alma 26.^{1, 26, 30}

²⁸ Alma 26.¹⁷

²⁹ Psalm 103.¹¹⁻¹²

³⁰ Matthew 11.²⁸

³¹ Psalm 34.⁶

³² Psalm 147.⁵

Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy,
and of his long-suffering towards the children of men?
Behold, I say unto you,
I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.”

Let’s not, then, *suppose* too little. In the spirit of true hope—something more than *supposing*—in the spirit of real, lively expectation, let us remember that he is prepared to do more than our meager suppositions *suppose*. He acts in our lives, blessing and using us in ways far beyond our wildest, most imaginative dreams. As the great Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, bears witness, God “is able [and ready] to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think!”³³

Yes, He “who alone doeth great wonders,”³⁴ “His name alone is excellent.”³⁵ In him, there is no end to what we might suppose.

“Even so, come Lord Jesus.”

³³ Eph. 3.²⁰

³⁴ Psalm 136.⁴

³⁵ Psalm 148.¹³

Alma 31.²⁴⁻²⁸

²⁴Now when Alma saw this his heart was grieved; for he saw that they were a wicked and a perverse people; yea, he saw that their hearts were set upon gold, and upon silver, and upon all manner of fine goods. ²⁵Yea, and he also saw that their hearts were lifted up unto great boasting, in their pride. ²⁶And he lifted up his voice to heaven, and cried, saying:

“O, how long, O Lord, wilt thou suffer that thy servants shall dwell here below in the flesh, to behold such gross wickedness among the children of men? ²⁷Behold, O God, they cry unto thee, and yet their hearts are swallowed up in their pride. Behold, O God, they cry unto thee with their mouths, while they are puffed up, even to greatness, with the vain things of the world. ²⁸Behold, O my God, their costly apparel, and their ringlets, and their bracelets, and their ornaments of gold, and all their precious things which they are ornamented with; and behold, their hearts are set upon them, and yet they cry unto thee and say—We thank thee, O God, for we are a chosen people unto thee, while others shall perish.”

meditation

After observing Zoramite society and witnessing their form of worship, Alma was deeply saddened to conclude that the Zoramites “were a wicked and a perverse people.” Yes their worship of God was arrogant and narcissistic. Yes, their attitude toward others was belittling and despicable. Yes, their doctrine was heretical. Yes, their rejection of Christ was tragic. Alma could have latched onto any one of these perversions in his prayerful complaint to God.

But, what stood out most to Alma, and what he lamented most bitterly to God was the materialism that had captured the hearts of the people. He not only saw their materialism as wicked and perverted, but described it in pained prayer to God as “gross wickedness.” Now, I guess there’s wickedness, and then there’s “gross wickedness”—wickedness on steroids. Materialism is wickedness on steroids. Materialism is a rejection of God and of Christ and all that he stands for. Materialism is idolatrous. Materialism is, as Jesus, himself, taught the Nephites, is a sign of perdition (3 Ne. 27.³²).

Alma sees numerous indications of Zoramite materialism. He finds it in their gold and silver. He finds it in their “fine goods.” He finds it in “their costly apparel, and their ringlets, and their bracelets, and their ornaments of gold, and all their precious things which they are ornamented with.” This latter, this indication of materialism that takes the form of fashion in dress, is a dead giveaway that the perdition of materialism has set in and begun its rot. It is like a flashing warning sign in the Book of Mormon.

In the very first year of his judgeship, Alma sees the flashing warning sign of materialism’s perdition in the anti-Christ, Nehor’s wearing of “very costly apparel” (Al. 1.⁶). Less than a decade later this form of perdition had made its way into the church of God. He saw their “fine silks” and “fine-twined linen.” He saw that “they began to wear very costly apparel” (Al. 4.⁶⁻⁷). Centuries later, inspired observers of society saw the materialistic perdition of which Jesus had so accurately predicted. “There began to be among them those who were lifted up in pride, such as the wearing of costly apparel, and all manner of fine pearls, and of the fine things of the world” (4 Ne. 1.²⁴).

Yes, the Zoramites fashion sense was anything but camouflage. Their “costly apparel” was a flagrant and flaunting sign of their perdition. It was a clearer sign than their not knowing how or where or when to pray. It was a clearer sign than their false and narcissistic sense of exceptionalism. It was clearer, even, than their rejection of Christ. There is simply no need for subtle or difficult discernment of obscure thoughts. The perdition of materialism is obvious to anyone who has heard and believed the word of God. Too bad it is so often seen as a sign of success, and sometimes, inexplicably, as a

sign of righteousness under the influence of false prosperity gospels. Too bad those called to shepherd God's children so often, if at all, treat it with kid gloves, as if it were merely evidence of poor judgment rather than a sign of perdition.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 31.²⁷⁻²⁹

²⁷Behold, O God, they cry unto thee,
and yet their hearts are swallowed up in their pride.
Behold, O God, they cry unto thee with their mouths,
while they are puffed up, even to greatness, with the vain things of the world.

²⁸Behold, O my God, their costly apparel,
and their ringlets, and their bracelets, and their ornaments of gold,
and all their precious things which they are ornamented with;
and behold, their hearts are set upon them,
and yet they cry unto thee and say—

We thank thee, O God, for we are a chosen people unto thee,
while others shall perish.

²⁹Yea, and they say that thou hast made it known unto them that there shall be no Christ.

meditation

As is all too common in religion, Zoramite religion was, above all else, simply a means whereby its adherents could maintain their alleged exceptionalism and superiority. They were, according to their confessional prayer, “elected.” This is repeated three times. They were “holy”—utterly different, separated, set apart, and unique. This is repeated twice. They were “chosen” (see Al. 31.¹⁵⁻¹⁸). The most devout used material wealth as a evidence, questionable as it is, of their natural superiority and divine election.

Alma, however, listening to the arrogant assertions of their haughty prayer, saw right through their false bravado. Accurately, he saw their “costly apparel,” with all its expensive accessories, as evidence of their having been “swallowed up” whole in human vanity, pride, and hubris. He saw that their hyper-respectability and prideful exhibitionism in dress and style was, in fact, their god. Their religion was one of idolatry.

There is always a bit of idolatry in materialism, as it is used inevitably as a sign of superiority and justification for demeaning others. Alma’s observation here is consistent with the entirety of the Book of Mormon. When people dress for success and declare their fashion to be a signifier of their goodness, they have entered the unhallowed portals of Bel, god of fertility and success. Such is a cause for the deep prayer of forgiveness rather than the puffed-up prayer of false gratitude.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 33.¹⁻³

¹Now after Alma had spoken these words, they sent forth unto him desiring to know whether they should believe in one God, that they might obtain this fruit of which he had spoken, or how they should plant the seed, or the word of which he had spoken, which he said must be planted in their hearts; or in what manner they should begin to exercise their faith.

²And Alma said unto them: “Behold, ye have said that ye could not worship your God because ye are cast out of your synagogues. But behold, I say unto you, if ye suppose that ye cannot worship God, ye do greatly err, and ye ought to search the scriptures; if ye suppose that they have taught you this, ye do not understand them. ³Do ye remember to have read what Zenos, the prophet of old, has said concerning prayer or worship?”

meditation 1

The Zoramite apostasy follows immediately upon the heels of Korihor’s apostasy and has much in common with it. Korihor’s doctrine was centered on the contention that “there could be no Christ,” Because there was no Christ, “there could be no atonement made... but every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore, every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength” (Al. 30.¹⁷). We see a direct impact of these doctrines on the Zoramite poor who were “cast out” and “not permitted to enter their synagogues.”

It is unlikely that the poor were, essentially, “excommunicated” through any form of physical coercion or violence. More likely it was accomplished through stigma and justified by doctrine. Their poverty, it was asserted, was the result of poor life management and genius, and was indicative of a lack of devotion to God. Being excommunicated for these reasons, the poor not only felt institutionally bereft but personally unworthy, leaving them with the feeling that they could not worship God. Alma will address all these issues in this sermon.

Unfortunately, today’s American society—including, and sometimes, especially, those who call themselves “Christian,” and so should know better—feels much the same about the poor. Poverty is seen as indicative of spiritual weakness. Though utilizing different vocabulary, modern American attitudes toward the poor are, much like that of the Zoramites, anti-Christ. Alma’s sermon, then, is as pertinent to 21st century American society and religion as it was to ancient Zoramite society and religion. In Alma’s sermon, today’s poor can still find balm to heal the wounds that flow from their own struggles and the salt that society so often rubs into them.

meditation 2

One of the first questions that the Zoramite poor who had been “cast out” of their synagogues posed to Alma was “whether they should believe in one God.” This might, at first glance, seem like an odd question. However, in the context, it is appropriate and perfectly logical.

Previous to what was essentially their excommunication, they had stood with others to confess, “thou [God] wast a spirit... thou art a spirit, and that thou wilt be a spirit forever” (Al. 31.¹⁵). This confession was meant to directly contradict the orthodox Nephite belief in Christ. It stood as a challenge to the doctrine that, in the language of Abinadi, “God himself should come down among the children of men, and take upon him the form of man” (Mos. 13.³⁴), or, in the language of Benjamin, “the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay” (Mos.

3.⁵).

This doctrine, as it would in early Christianity, caused confusion, especially for hard core monotheists. While addressing other issues—for example, the audience’s sense that they could not worship God because they lacked institutional sanction, and their sense of guilt and unworthiness that they were made to feel at their poverty—in the following sermon Alma will reaffirm through his own and multiple other prophetic testimonies the reality of Christ and the very real benefit he brings to those who believe and have faith in him.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 3

Having been deemed unworthy specifically because of their poverty, the Zoramite poor were “cast out” from their synagogues. Essentially excommunicated, these poor Zoramites felt that they could not worship God. No doubt, the fact that they possessed no institutional structure contributed to this feeling. However, they undoubtedly also felt a sense of guilt, shame, and unworthiness before a god who, the institution had taught them, found poverty to be indicative of a sinful lack of devotion to him. Alma’s sermon seeks to address the poor’s concerns and correct their false ideas about God Himself and how/when/where they could worship Him.

Alma begins by quoting “Zenos, the prophet of old” and what he had to say about “prayer or worship” (vs. 4-11). Before turning to this quotation, we should note Alma’s “prayer or worship.” Here, Alma essentially uses “prayer” and “worship” as synonymous. Prayer is an act of worship. Prayer should be worshipful. Now, one could argue, I suppose, that asking God to act in one’s life is an act of worship since it indicates a belief or hope that he is powerful and interested enough to act in our lives. But, as everyone knows, children can make many requests of parents without really appreciating them for who they are, or even for the benefits they bring.

More than requests, true “prayer or worship” is dominated by expression of gratitude for, and awe and worship of God. It is dominated by talking to God about God. It is dominated by an inquiry into and about God, Himself. If you’ve done this, you know of its joys, insights, and benefits. If you haven’t, you should give it a try.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 33.⁴⁻⁷

⁴“For he said: ‘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.

⁵Yea, O God, and 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.

⁶And again, O God, when I did turn to my house thou didst hear me in my prayer.

⁷And when I did turn unto my closet, O Lord, and prayed unto thee, thou didst hear me.

meditation

In this reading, Alma addresses a misunderstanding concerning prayer that he observed among the apostate Zoramites. They were under the false notion that one could only pray in designated, sanctified locations. Thus, those unjustly excommunicated from that sanctified place—the famous Rameumptom—felt separated from God as they could not pray. Utilizing a quotation from a mostly unknown prophet, Zenos, Alma demonstrates the error of this view. Zenos testifies that God has heard his prayers no matter where he was. From the most distant place, the wilderness, to the nearest and most private place, his closet, and all parts in between, field and house, God has heard and responded to his prayers. Location does not matter and is of no hindrance or advantage in God’s hearing of prayer.

But, neither Alma nor Zenos are satisfied in leaving it at that. Rather, they wish to make an even more important and determinative point. God hears prayers, wherever their launching point, because of His own divine nature. God hears prayers because He is merciful. This truth is repeated three times in this reading and will be repeated several more times in what follows.

We might pray in all the right places, at all the right times, dressed in all the right attire, with all the right words, but if God was not merciful in Himself, all this rightness would be for naught. Rather than making an appeal to God based on any such personal rightness, we should always appeal to His mercy. In fact, an acknowledgement of and appeal to God’s mercy ought to be a central and sincere feature of every prayer—beginning, middle, end, and all parts in between. We enter, remain in, and leave meaningful and communicative prayer in the same way that the ancient Hebrew Psalmist entered, remained in, and left his beloved temple where he hoped to commune with God and see His beauty (See Ps. 27).

“I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy” (Ps. 5.⁷).

“Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice:
have mercy also upon me, and answer me” (Ps. 27.⁷).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 33.⁸⁻¹⁰

⁸Yea, 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.

⁹Yea, O God, thou hast been merciful unto me,
and heard my cries in the midst of thy congregations.

¹⁰Yea, and 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.

meditation

In addressing the Zoramite misconception that only prayers offered from the Rameumptom, a sort of prayer altar, Alma quotes the prophet Zenos (vs. 4-11) in hopes of illustrating his assertion that God hears sincerely offered prayers no matter their provenience. Three times, Zenos repeats his insistence that this divine willingness to hear and answer prayers wherever they may come from is a consequence of the divine character of mercy (4-7). In this reading, Zenos insists that not only does God hear and answer prayers no matter where they are offered, but that he hears and answers prayers in whatever circumstance the petitioners find themselves. It matters not at all whether one is among friends or foes. Once more, Zenos stresses, repeating it twice, that this divine willingness is the result of divine mercy.

In appreciating Zenos' witness of God's merciful willingness to hear prayer no matter the location or circumstances of the petitioner, we might miss the rather radical nature of Alma's message. He might have selected any number of quotations. But he chose this one. Alma, it seems, can walk and chew gum at the same time. He can make his point that God hears and answers prayers no matter where they come from or what the petitioners' circumstances might be. He can also make his point that God is merciful and that his willingness to hear and answer prayers comes from this divine character trait. With this reading, we find that Alma can make a third point.

“Thou hast also heard me when I have been cast out and have been despised by mine enemies.”

How applicable to the Zoramite condition is that?! Because prayer is real and in it we address our life as it really is, it is not all sweetness. With God, we address the good and the bad. We discuss with him those who are dearest to us: friends and family. We also, discuss our “enemies.” We address those who “cast out.” We address those who “despise.” We address those who display enmity. The names of those who do evil in the world—targeting ourselves and others—drop from our prayerful lips as easily as those who do good.

God, Zenos assures, hears such prayers. He takes note of the enemies and makes note of their names. And he answers such prayers. He visits the oppressor in “anger with speedy destruction.”

In prayer, then, we find a powerful form of resistance. Through prayer we resist evil and oppression and hate. Through prayer, God joins our resistance. This must have been music to the oppressed Zoramites' ears. On the other hand, to the oppressors, the Zoramite elite, this must have sounded like a shot across the bow, an incitement to resistance; for if one believes in the power of prayer, one does not wish to have that power turned against them.

No doubt, it is godly to pray that our “enemies” and, indeed, all oppressors repent and change their

ways. But history tells us, and scripture affirms, that many, perhaps most, will not make the necessary changes. They will continue to hate and oppress. So, our faith is such that we are prepared to boldly and fearlessly take the next step. We offer prayers of resistance. We accept the need for and reality of a “speedy destruction” upon those who are enemies of righteousness and oppressors of the vulnerable. It becomes the only weapon we are justified in taking up against them. It is wielded, not, in the end, for the express purpose of punishing or destroying the oppressor, but to liberate the oppressed. It is Zenos’ testimony that it works. And it is Zenos’ testimony that this too, the “speedy destruction” of the enemy, is an act of divine mercy showered upon the oppressed.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 33.¹¹

¹¹““And thou didst hear me because of mine afflictions and my 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.””

meditation

In his desire to prove to the Zoramites that they don't need the Rameumptom to have their prayers heard, Alma utilizes a prayer that the prophet Zenos offered. In that prayer Zenos confesses that God has heard his prayers wherever he was and under whatever circumstances he found himself. God was particularly attentive to him when he was in affliction and expressed sincere desire for help; thus revealing God as one who is drawn to those in need, and abundantly willing and able to help. Zenos repeats numerous times and in every instance that God heard his prayers because of the divine trait of mercy that exists in Deity.

In wrapping up his prayer, and thus the end of Alma's quotation, Zenos turns his attention to “the Son.” He confesses to God that “it is because of thy Son” that God has been merciful and “hast turned thy judgments away from me.” Whoever Zenos was and whenever or wherever he lived, he seems to have had intimate glimpses, as many others had, into the coming of Christ and events surrounding his ministry and his atoning sacrifice (See 1 Ne. 19.¹⁰⁻¹²). Thus, Zenos was able to witness Jesus' revelation of God. This revelation included Jesus' portrayal of God's mercy.

Perhaps Zenos witnessed, as Nephi did (see 1 Ne. 11.³¹), how people with all manner of afflictions came to Jesus in sincere desire for help. Perhaps he saw that rather than scold individuals because of the imperfections that resided in them, he generously assisted them without judgement. Perhaps Zenos saw that Jesus, the purist revelation of God, was the sort of Being who was drawn to those in need. He lived to make things better for all.

Thus, through Zenos, Alma reminds us of the importance of seeing and witnessing Jesus, the Son of God. It is only through him that we can come to know, appreciate, and experience God and His divine character. Among the many characteristics of God; among the many divine characteristics that we must come to understand and accept, “mercy” is one of the most important.

With Zenos' reminder that Christ is the key that unlocks our hearts and minds to God's mercy, it is impossible to overstate the importance of the New Testament Gospels, our most direct and present access point to Jesus' revelation of God and His character. It is impossible to overstate how vital it is that we engage in reading and pondering the Gospels until the revelations of God's love and commitment to us written in them are finally and irrevocably written on the stony tablets of our own hearts.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 33.¹²⁻¹⁴

¹²And now Alma said unto them: “Do ye believe those scriptures which have been written by them of old? ¹³Behold, if ye do, ye must believe what Zenos said; for, behold he said: ‘Thou hast turned away thy judgments because of thy Son.’

¹⁴Now behold, my brethren, I would ask if ye have read the scriptures? If ye have, how can ye disbelieve on the Son of God?

meditation

It is a common rhetorical device. Whether you consciously recognized it or not, you have certainly witnessed speakers use it. Possibly, you have used it yourself. A speaker utilizes a quote. After reading the quote, the speaker rereads some smaller portion of it. After rereading the small portion, the speaker often offers remarks and commentary on that portion. This smaller portion contains the main idea that the speaker wishes to teach and have his audience to consider and understand from the quote. It often contains the main point of the entire discourse.

Alma utilizes this rhetorical device to good effect in his sermon delivered to a small gathering of Zoramites in the land of Antionum. This small gathering had been excommunicated from their synagogues with their central prayer altars, the famous Rameumptum. Because of their exclusion, these Zoramites believed that they could not pray, and felt disconnected from God. In addressing their misunderstanding, Alma utilizes a prayer offered by one, Zenos, a prophet whose exact era and location remain unknown.

Making use of Zenos’ prayer, Alma is able to teach his Zoramite audience that they can pray at any location—home or abroad— and under any circumstances—favorable or unfavorable, in public or in private. Quoting Zenos, he teaches that this open access to God through prayer is possible because of the divine trait of mercy that is central to God’s Being. He teaches, further, that it is the Son of God that “turns away” our fears that the “judgements” of God might keep God from hearing our prayers.

Having made these points, so pertinent to Zoramite misunderstanding, Alma ends his quotation. It is at this point that he repeats this small portion of his quotation: “for thou hast turned thy judgments away from me, because of thy Son.”

It is in this requoted portion of Zenos’ prayer that we find the principal point Alma wishes to make. Yes, the problem of where, and when and how one prays is important. But Alma seems to realize that the most common roadblock to consistent, meaningful, and anticipatory prayer is not found in such mundane and formalistic issues, but in human psychology. We believe that God is a very demanding God. We believe that He is easily irritated when we do not meet His expectations. We believe that His irritation leads Him to ignore our prayers and deny our requests and expressions of faith. Such beliefs destroy the prayer life of believers. They cause them to pray less often and with diminished faith and hope.

But Jesus, Son of God, solves this psychological problem. In and through him, we discover a God who is merciful, generous, and understanding. In and through Christ we find the judgements of God turned away, and Him hearing, accepting, and responding to our heartfelt prayers. The true and serious Zoramite misunderstanding was not concerning the formalities of prayer. Rather, the misunderstanding came in not keeping the eye of faith on Jesus and through Him discovering the most merciful of Beings.

The Zoramite misunderstanding is alive and well today. It is amongst us. We could use a good reading, and rereading, and rereading of Zenos prayer. Often and always. It is a master class into the character of God as revealed through Jesus and the access to God that that divine character grants us.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 33.¹²⁻¹⁶

¹²And now Alma said unto them: “Do ye believe those scriptures which have been written by them of old? ¹³Behold, if ye do, ye must believe what Zenos said; for, behold he said:

‘Thou hast turned away thy judgments because of thy Son.’

¹⁴Now behold, my brethren, I would ask if ye have read the scriptures? If ye have, how can ye disbelieve on the Son of God? ¹⁵For it is not written that Zenos alone spake of these things, but Zenock also spake of these things—¹⁶For behold, he said:

‘Thou art angry, O Lord, with this people, because they will not understand thy mercies which thou hast bestowed upon them because of thy Son.’

meditation

“Anger” is probably not the right word. “Anger” is probably not an emotion that finds itself stirring in the bosom of God. “Anger,” human anger is always accompanied by a loss of control. We cannot and do not believe that God loses control. He is always master of himself. So, another word is in order—disappointment, maybe? I don’t know.

Anyway, we meditate today on Alma’s quotation from Zenock: “Thou art angry [disappointed?], O Lord, with this people, because....” Stop right there! Finish the sentence yourself. Finish it again, this time differently. Finish it again and again. A hundred times. Did you ever finish it as Zencok did?

“...because they will not understand thy mercies.”

What’s so bad about this misunderstanding? You decide. But Father went to an awful lot of effort to help us understand, and, understanding, to accept and experience his mercy. He sent his Son to reveal it by portraying it in his own life day after day after day by the way he interacted with others. It cost His Son’s life.

We don’t want to anger God, or disappoint him, or sadden him, or whatever else we may wish to call it. Possibly, this might require some “careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts.” More significantly, though, it will require some time and experience with God. It will require a personal encounter with that Being whose mercy is as expansive as the great expanse of the universe (Ps. 103.¹¹). Then our meditations will raise to new, unheard of heights.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 33.¹⁵⁻¹⁷

¹⁵“For it is not written that Zenos alone spake of these things, but Zenock also spake of these things—

¹⁶For behold, he said:

‘Thou art angry, O Lord, with this people,
because they will not understand thy mercies
which thou hast bestowed upon them because of thy Son.

¹⁷And now, my brethren, ye see that a second prophet of old has testified of the Son of God, and because the people would not understand his words they stoned him to death.

meditation

Every once in a while, someone will ask me which book of scripture or which passages of scripture have been most influential in my life. Immediately, Alma 26.¹⁶⁻¹⁷. Though it is difficult to choose, if I was forced to choose just one passage to take with me to a deserted island, this would be the one. Ammon’s wonder at God, especially the extent of God’s generosity resonates deeply within me. Verse 16 of today’s reading would likely be in my top ten. The reason is personal, but not so personal as to avoid sharing.

Some years ago, as I was reading Alma 33, I came to verse 16. I no longer remember what happened to distract me—my own wondering thoughts, a phone call, the entrance of my wife or a child—but whatever it was, it was timed such that I my reading stopped with this: “Thou art angry, O Lord, with this people, because...” When whatever the distraction was had ended, I picked up my scriptures to pick up where I had left off. But before I could begin reading again, the phrase came back forcefully into my mind. It was accompanied by a thought: “Finish the sentence yourself.”

So, I did. I no longer remember the exact attitude or behavior that I thought of, but I finished the sentence myself with something that I felt angered or saddened God. As I went to return to the text, I was prompted to write whatever it was I had thought of on a piece of paper. I retrieved an 8½ x 11 sheet of lined composition paper and wrote at the top: “Thou art angry, O Lord, with this people, because...” I then, noted the first thing that had come to my mind. I was then prompted to write down another thing that might anger or sadden God. I did so. This happened repeatedly. Soon, I had quite the list. In fact, I had filled one side of the sheet of paper. This probably contains some deep dark insight into my psychology at the time, but we’ll leave that alone for now.

Finally, I felt prompted to return to Alma’s text. So I read, “because they will not understand thy mercies...” That was as far as I read before this question came forcefully into my mind, “Is that on your list?” I already knew the answer to the question, but I went through my list anyway, item by item. When I reached the bottom, what I already knew was confirmed.

“No, it is not,” I answered in my mind.

As if another spoke, I heard, “No, it is not indeed. Zenock’s reason for God’s anger or sadness with us is no where to be found among your dozens of reasons. Why do you think that is?”

The is final six-word question seemed to send an electric shock through my system. I knew why. I knew why Zenock’s reason was not on my list. It was missing from my list because I did “not understand God’s mercies.”

I began that day diligently seeking to understand His mercies. I have come to understand a little better. They are still too much for me to grasp. They are still, on many days, more than I would or

could have supposed. But at least I can say this: If the same prompting ever comes again, you can bet your last dollar that the first thing on my list, in bold print, will be, “because they will not understand thy mercies...” It is simply impossible to say how many of the other sins that I, we, put on our list of those that anger or sadden God flow from this most fundamental error in understanding.

So, go ahead. Make your list. Check it twice.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 33.¹⁸⁻²⁰

¹⁸But behold, this is not all; these are not the only ones who have spoken concerning the Son of God. ¹⁹Behold, he was spoken of by Moses; yea, and behold a type was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live. And many did look and live. ²⁰But few understood the meaning of those things, and this because of the hardness of their hearts. But there were many who were so hardened that they would not look, therefore they perished. Now the reason they would not look is because they did not believe that it would heal them.

meditation

In his sermon delivered to the Zoramite poor, Alma quoted the little-known prophets, Zenos and Zenock, as evidence of the mercy that God shows humankind through His Son. With this reading, Alma brings out the big guns: the prophet of all prophets, Moses.

Alma refers to a story that we find today in Numbers 21.⁵⁻⁹. Here, we find those who had escaped Egyptian bondage and were traveling with Moses through the wilderness assailed by poisonous snakes in consequence of sin—the sin being displeasure with Moses and his leadership. In response to the peoples’ expressions of regret, Moses, at God’s command, lifts a “fiery serpent” upon a pole with a promise that those who look upon the serpent will survive any bites they might suffer from the invasive critters.

Numbers does not explicitly inform us of the people’s response. Nevertheless, we might have guessed from its, “if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived,” that not everyone got on board with the remedy (it’s either that, or not everyone was bitten). Alma, however, seems to be aware of a stronger tradition, for he reports that “there were many who were so hardened that they would not look.” Alma chalks up the peoples’ failure to look to disbelief on their part that the proposed remedy was sufficient to the task: healing the bitten. Elsewhere, Nephi, while using the story, as Alma, to encourage trust in God, indicated that people did not look upon the healing totem because it seemed too easy (1 Ne. 17.⁴¹).

This latter reason given for not looking at the serpent has always perplexed me. Who refuses to do something because it is too easy? Easy is good. We love to do things that do not challenge us too much and that bring sure success. Our fragile egos, after all, need every success we can get.

But what has always captured my imagination is this: If the people did not turn their eyes to look upon the hoisted snake, where were their eyes directed? They had to be looking somewhere, didn’t they? Surely, they didn’t simply shut their eyes tightly closed and hope for the best. I mean, snakes were everywhere, writhing between and around legs, etc. Who closes their eyes in such a pickle? No, their eyes were open, sure enough. And their eyes were fixed on, fixated by the snakes. Isn’t that what you would do? Wouldn’t you keep your eyes on the ground, watching every snake’s movement so that you could avoid their deadly bite?

Alma, and Jesus after him, understand that there’s a type in the snake hoisted upon a stick: Jesus and his crucifixion. There is also a type in the poisonous snakes: sin. Finally, we suggest, there is also a type in those under threat of death.

There is a type of disciple who fears being bitten—fears to sin. It’s the worst thing they can imagine. It becomes their fixation. Sin becomes their fixation. They keep their eyes peeled to the ground awaiting its attack. What hard, demanding labor this is! It is absolutely exhausting. But, not being bitten in the first place is the only solution to the problem of sin in which they can really trust. Once the poison

enters the veins, who knows if the physician is really skilled enough to provide the remedy. And, even before that, and more troubling, who knows if the physician will be *willing* to provide the remedy. Perhaps he will be disgusted, irritated, by the patient's foolishness in allowing himself to be bitten in the first place.

Yes, better to do the hard work of avoiding sin altogether than the easy work of trusting in the mercy and goodness and ability of Jesus, Son of God. Hmm, I guess history does repeat itself.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 33.²¹⁻²³

²¹O my brethren, if ye could be healed by merely casting about your eyes that ye might be healed, would ye not behold quickly, or would ye rather harden your hearts in unbelief, and be slothful, that ye would not cast about your eyes, that ye might perish? ²²If so, wo shall come upon you; but if not so, then cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people, and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins; and that he shall 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.

²³And now, my brethren, I desire that ye shall plant this word in your hearts, and as it beginneth to swell even so nourish it by your faith. And behold, it will become a tree, springing up in you unto everlasting life. And then may God grant unto you that your burdens may be light, through the joy of his Son. And even all this can ye do if ye will. Amen.

Meditation

Back in Alma 32, Alma admonished the disenfranchised Zoramite poor to engage in an “experiment,” “exercise a particle of faith,” “desire to believe,” “plant” a “true seed” or “word” “in [their] hearts,” and “nourish the word” until the seed became “a tree springing up unto everlasting life.” The imagery, along with the promise, seems to have struck a chord with his audience, for immediately they asked, “how they should plant the seed, or the word of which he had spoken” (Al. 33.¹). This question drew from Alma the sermon we have explored in this series of meditations; a sermon dominated by a quotation from a prayer the prophet, Zenos, uttered.

Now, as he wraps up his sermon and prepares to hand the baton over to his companion, Amulek, Alma returns to his planting metaphor: “I desire that ye shall plant *this word* in your hearts.” What, “word,” exactly, are they to plant in their hearts? To this point, Alma’s sermon has contained 709 of them, words, that is. Is it the word, “prayer,” they are to plant? Has this been the central point of his discourse? Is prayer the key to their happiness, fulfilment, and advancement? We might certainly have thought so early on the discourse. But the longer Alma talked, the clearer it became that there was something weightier on his mind.

Our first clue came with the repetition of a “word.” We noted this repetition in a previous meditation in this series. But, here it is again, in a little different presentational form.

“Thou art merciful, O God...” (Al. 33.⁴)

“Thou wast merciful...” (Al. 33.⁴)

“Thou wast merciful...” (Al. 33.⁵)

“Thou art merciful...” (al. 33.⁸)

“Thou hast been merciful...” (33.⁹)

So, is this the word, or the three of them, that one must plant in their heart in order to know true joy and fulfillment: “mercy” or “God is merciful”? Certainly, knowledge of this foundational divine trait is vital. As Moroni wraps up his *magnus corpus*, he admonishes those who “read *these things*” and “receive *these things*” to “ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if *these things* are not true” (See Moro. 10.³⁻⁴). But before or as we do such asking, Moroni suggests that something very important must be underlying the asking: “remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive *these things*.” We are to do more, though, than “remember” God’s mercy. We are to “ponder *it* in [our] hearts.”

Here, in this admonition, Moroni always refers to his *magnus corpus* as “these things.” Plural. But, when it comes to pondering, it is suddenly “it.” Singular. As we progress in our appreciation of his *magnus corpus*, we may come to “ponder” more and more words. But to know of its truth, we must ponder and come to accept a more fundamental truth. We must ponder these three words, “God is merciful.” For if we do not believe in a merciful God, we, who are ignorant and weak in knowledge and spiritual capacity, cannot believe he will answer our prayer to know “if *these things* are not true.”

So, yes, knowing that God is merciful is central to our happiness, fulfillment, and advancement. Yes, it is central to Alma’s message to the Zoramites. But, notwithstanding the importance of knowing that “God is merciful,” we still have not arrived at “the word” that is to be planted.

As we saw in a previous meditation from this series, Alma advanced slowly toward his main point as he quoted one sentence after another of Zenos’ prayer to God. Finally, he arrives at his destination.

“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.”

Having arrived at his destination, Alma ends his quotation. “Do ye,” he then asks, “believe those scriptures which have been written by them of old?” Then, to emphasize his main point, he repeats it.

“Behold, if ye do, ye must believe what Zenos said; for, behold he said: *‘Thou hast turned away thy judgments because of thy Son.’*”

God *is* merciful. This is vital. But God is merciful “because of [His] Son.” Or, better, we discover that God is merciful because of His Son. His Son came to earth, above all else, to reveal or introduce His Father (See Jn. 1.¹⁸). The Son was “the brightness of [God’s] glory, and the express image of [God’s] person” (Heb. 1.³). In the Son “dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2.⁹). As we see and watch the Son walk and minister on the dusty roads of Judea, we are seeing and watching God, Father (See Jn. 14.⁷⁻¹⁰).

So, yes, prayer is vital to our happiness and fulfillment and advancement. However, for prayer to achieve its potential in our lives, we must know that God is merciful, for we know the depth of our inadequacies all too well. But we are reliant on the Son to know God is merciful. We must see and believe the Son’s message of God’s mercy that he reenacted in person on earth. We must believe in the Son. We must plant him and his display of mercy in our lives.

This, then, is the word, the name that we must plant in our hearts: Jesus. Oh, what a blessed name! Just the sound of it warms our hearts, fills us with hope and joy, and gives access to “everlasting life.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Alma 34.¹⁵⁻¹⁸

¹⁵And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance. ¹⁶And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption. ¹⁷Therefore may God grant unto you, my brethren, that ye may begin to exercise your faith unto repentance, that ye begin to call upon his holy name, that he would have mercy upon you... ¹⁸yea, cry unto him for mercy; for he is mighty to save.

Meditation

We all know that forgiveness requires faith or trust in God and His willingness to forgive. We sense that forgiveness is a gift. But in today's passage, Amulek takes one more step backwards toward origins—it's the same step that we explored in our meditation on Acts 5.²⁹⁻³². Jesus' sacrifice, the evangelist witnesses, "bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance." Note: not faith unto *forgiveness*, but faith unto *repentance*. The repentance that proceeds forgiveness is as much a gift as forgiveness.

Without Jesus' atonement and its revelation of divine mercy our ability to conceive of and dare to repent would be impossible. And even if we could somehow conceive of it on our own, who would dare exposing their sinfulness through confession to a perfect and holy God who held high expectations of us? They simply couldn't. They wouldn't. They wouldn't take the chance. Not without some evidence that exposing their sins, their sorrow for sin, and their desire to improve would result in some positive rather than negative divine response. Jesus' revelation of a merciful God is just such evidence. So, before we "take credit" for having repented, let's remember to thank God for gifting us with an awareness of the very possibility.

We mention this again because it just seems like something we should keep in mind during our Lent repentance. We should express gratitude for God mercy in making even the prospect of repentance known and feel possible and safe.

There are many principles in today's reading for which we can be grateful. Among them, I have always been impressed by Amulek's understanding that Jesus' sacrifice and the "bowels of mercy" that are revealed in it, "overpowereth justice." I suppose this impresses me so because I cannot count the number of times that I have been forcefully and certainly reminded that "mercy cannot *rob* justice" (See Al. 42.²⁵). "What does that even mean?" I have often asked. I have often followed this question up with, "But you do know, don't you, that mercy can *satisfy* justice?" Sometimes I have been more aggressive in my follow up: "and that Jesus' mercy can *overpower* justice." To overpower is a very intense, aggressive word. Jesus moves aggressively against sin and injustice.

I cannot explain Jesus' ability to "overpower" justice any more than I can explain what it means to "rob" justice. But, I do know what it feels like, for I have felt it. I have witnessed in my own life justice shrink and slink away when Jesus offers his merciful resistance to justice's intimidating demands and threats to "expose" me.

Maybe you have too. If so, what a great time Lent is. A time to remember the "safety" we have found when "encircled" in Jesus' most powerful arms. And with that remembrance, a time to "cry unto him for mercy" as we seek to deepen our commitment to repenting and improving through the grace of God. If

you have not witnessed such a miracle in your life, what a great time Lent is. A time to experiment and seek to be “encircled in the arms of safety” through faithful confession, repentance, and trust in God’s merciful disposition. A time to experience firsthand that truly, truly “he is mighty to save.” He has the power to save and he has an insatiable desire to save. We can have the utmost faith in both saving truths.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 6, 2024)

Alma 37.⁹

Yea, I say unto you, were it not for these things that these records do contain, which are on these plates, Ammon and his brethren could not have convinced so many thousands of the Lamanites of the incorrect tradition of their fathers; yea, these records and their words brought them unto repentance; that is, they brought them to the knowledge of the Lord their God, and to rejoice in Jesus Christ their Redeemer.

meditation

I have heard it said that “living the gospel is simple.” I don’t know how true that is, but when it comes to repentance, it seems to me that we have made it anything but simple. Repentance is often described as a multi-step—how many steps, I can’t even keep track of anymore—process, that left me with the feeling that it was a very difficult and drawn-out affair. One practically needs a computer to pull it off. After hearing the process described, I have often responded with a, “Phew,” and even a, “Yuck,” followed with a, “I’ll never pull all that off.”

I suppose this is one of the reasons that Alma’s statement about repentance found in today’s reading has always been a bit of a lifeline to me. Before explaining what I learn from Alma about repentance, a brief grammatical lesson might be in order.

Suppose I said, “I went to the store, that is, I went shopping.” Or, “He yelled at the cashier, that is, he treated the cashier rudely.” What is the purpose of my, “that is,” statement? My “that is” statements serve to emphasize or clarify the preceding statement. A “that is” statement can serve as a kind of grammatical equal sign (=). In my first example, my second statement (“that is”) emphasizes or clarifies why I went to the store—to shop. In the second, my, “that is” statement emphasizes or clarifies that in speaking of one’s yelling at the cashier, I meant to signify the rudeness of the one doing the yelling.

What do grammatical equal signs have to do with today’s reading? Alma utilizes the grammatical equal sign, “that is” to explicate what repentance, first and foremost, meant to him.

“These records and their words brought them [the Lamanites] unto repentance; *that is*, they brought them to the knowledge of the Lord their God, and to rejoice in Jesus Christ their Redeemer.”

“These records and their words brought them unto repentance”

=

“These records and their words brought them to the knowledge of the Lord their God and to rejoice in Jesus Christ their Redeemer.”

Now, some may feel that such equivalencies are inadequate. To which I would say, “First, if these equivalencies feel inadequate, you’ll need to take it up with Alma. They are Alma’s not mine.”

For those who feel Alma’s equivalent inadequate, many would likely be more satisfied with an equivalency that goes something like this: “These records and their words brought them unto repentance; that is they brought them to forsake sin.”

However—and I say this with some trepidation—“‘repentance’ ≠ ‘forsaking of sin.’” The forsaking of sin is a long, life-long process with lots and lots of stumbles and falls. That is, the forsaking of sin is a *consequence* of repentance, not repentance itself.” Repentance may lead, eventually and painstakingly, to sins being forsaken. But it is not what it means to repent. The forsaking of sin is certainly not a

“prerequisite” for forgiveness. No. No. No. A thousand times no! If one can only say they have repented after every sin has been forsaken, then no one has ever repented in the history of mankind!

Every day is a season of repentance. Lent is a season to consider repentance and redouble our efforts. In that effort, we can know the experience and joy of repentance by increasing our “knowledge of the Lord [our] God. We can seek to “rejoice in Jesus Christ [our] Redeemer” more fully. We can discover the depth of His “goodness... his matchless power, and his wisdom, and his patience, and his long-suffering toward the children of men” (See Mos. 4.⁶). This is a repentance that brings immediate release and peace of conscience. That’s a repentance that possesses the power to do the life-long work of forsaking sin.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 19, 2024)

Alma 39.⁸⁻⁹

⁸But behold, ye cannot hide your crimes from God; and except ye repent they will stand as a testimony against you at the last day. ⁹Now my son, I would that ye should repent and forsake your sins, and go no more after the lusts of your eyes, but cross yourself in all these things; for except ye do this ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God. Oh, remember, and take it upon you, and cross yourself in these things.

meditation

As I contemplate the season of Lent and consider its requirement for an additional level of self-control, self-restraint, and self-denial, I can't help thinking of Jesus and the extraordinary self-control and restraint that he exercised throughout his life. It is evident from those very first moments when he resisted the desert temptation to use his power to alleviate his own hunger or gratify his pride to the moment when he refused to call upon legions of angels to stop his arrest to the moments when he refused to halt the suffering and pain of the cross. The cross is certainly a symbol of salvation and service to others. But it is also an incredible sign of self-restraint. How badly he must have wanted the pain to end. Yet, he did nothing to diminish, let alone end it.

Though it would happen generations later and half a world way, Alma knew of Jesus' excruciating death through crucifixion. While there is no evidence that Nephite society possessed a private ritual like that of the Catholic crossing of self,³⁶ it seems likely that Alma could have thought of the cross as a symbol of self-control and restraint. Maybe the self-sacrifice Jesus demonstrated on the cross was on Alma's mind when he admonished his son, Corianton, to "go no more after the lusts of your eyes, but cross yourself in all these things" (Al 39.⁹). Maybe Alma wished to remind Corianton of Jesus' own self-restraint and encourage him to follow that divine example.

During Lent, it is wise and good to consider the level of our own self-restraint and self-control. We all know lust. The root of the Greek word translated as "lust" is *thyo*. It denotes "violent movement." Among its many uses, it can refer to boiling water. Lust is a desire that moves and brings to action. It is a longing and craving. One can hardly walk into a department store, grocery store, or browse through Amazon or Wayfair or a host of other on-line sites, without feeling lust begin to bubble up. Our materialistic society assaults us constantly. Advertisers seek to magnify our lust and move us to action so that we yield to their temptations to consume.

Thus, Alma's admonition to "cross yourself" is highly appropriate. Among its many meanings, to cross oneself denotes our need to "oppose," "contradict," "obstruct," "disrupt," and even "betray" the demanding lusts of our natural, fallen nature—a nature so empty that it lusts to fill the holes with anything, however inconsequential, transitory, and harmful. Yes, we must act in betrayal of our natural, lustful state and engage in the mortification of our flesh. We must fight our lustful nature to the death as Jesus did. Indeed, the fight is to death—either the death of the spirit or the death of the flesh.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: February 15, 2024)

³⁶ LDS culture and ritual, it is claimed, does not utilize the cross or focus on Jesus' death. Both claims are bogus. The only ritual in which we engage weekly is one that commemorates and reenacts Jesus' death. And, if one knows what to look for and what they are seeing, the LDS endowment is replete with the sign of the cross, often "crooked," in the signs and tokens of the priesthood.

3 Nephi 1.¹³⁻¹⁴

¹³Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world, to show unto the world that I will fulfil all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets. ¹⁴Behold, I come unto my own, to fulfil all things which I have made known unto the children of men from the foundation of the world, and to do the will, both of the Father and of the Son—of the Father because of me, and of the Son because of my flesh. And behold, the time is at hand, and this night shall the sign be given.

meditation

“On the morrow come *I* into the world.” Thus spoke Jesus. Did he speak this from his mother’s womb only hours before his birth? Or did he speak it out of the midst of his heavenly throne room? I, for one, do not know. I cannot comprehend the incarnation of God. I do not know how the “Godhead” operates. Nobody, I assert, does. There is far too much arrogance about it though. I do know that.

But that the “I” in this reading is Jesus seems clear. So too is the “Me.” Jesus that is. And both the “I” and the “Me” are at the time of the announcement a disembodied God. He has been the “God” of the Book of Mormon from its start. The God of the Book of Mormon was God before the little band of Israelites ever left Jerusalem. Before the Book of Mormon was even in glimmer in Nephi’s eye. This God, God of the Old Testament, was named Yahweh. So, the “I” that is coming into the world on the morrow is, apparently, Jesus/God/Yahweh.

As the disembodied Yahweh, he is “Father.” When God/Yahweh/Father enters a mortal tabernacle, he will become God/Jesus/Son.” It is all beyond confusing, really. One simply must remain humble about it all. But this much is clear. Jesus, by whatever name, was an extraordinary man. Scripture claims that he was more than this. That he was an extraordinary God. A God who, somehow, willingly left the divine realms to, somehow, become mortal. A God who, somehow, felt totally and comfortably connected to humankind. A God who, somehow, by any means possible, wished to reveal his commitment to humankind, its redemption, and its advancement.

Here, at least, we must throw caution to the wind and testify that God, by whatever name, is and was and always will be a Being who is committed and dedicated to the advancement of others, whatever the cost to him and however unworthy they may seem of such dedication, and however incomprehensible it may all seem.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

3 Nephi 11.⁹⁻¹¹

⁹*He stretched forth his hand and spake unto the people, saying:

¹⁰“Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. ¹¹And behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning.”

meditation

With his departure from this world and his reemergence as a resurrected and glorified being, Jesus looks back at his mortal experiences and speaks of having “drunk out of that bitter cup.” This post-resurrection reminiscence reminds us of the words Jesus prayed in Gethsemane during the final hours of his mortal life: “Oh my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Mt. 26.³⁹). We would invite the reader to consider why, in this most bitter of moments, Jesus abandoned all direct language and resorted to the language of symbolism and metaphor. What did he wish to communicate with his “bitter cup”?

The bitter cup is a potent and oft-used scriptural symbol for the most intense form of suffering. The “bitter cup” is characterized as having the intensity of a lake, not of water but of “fire and brimstone.” At the same time, the lake is swept by a “horrible tempest.” Drinking from this cup is like drinking “guilt,” “filthiness,” “dregs,” “fury,” “wrath,” “indignation,” “astonishment,” and “desolation.” Drinking from this cup is so overwhelming as to cause one to “tremble,” to “spue” and “fall down” as one drunk. Drinking the cup is so emotionally powerful and disruptive as to cause “madness.” Drinking from this cup causes one to feel “cast out” and to “shrink from the presence of the Lord.”

It seems likely that in this grievous hour, Jesus lacked the stamina to say all of this. It seems that what Jesus suffered in becoming mortal, living among the fallen race of humanity, suffering its hatred and contempt, and living a perfect, exalting life all the while is beyond words. And so he settled on these... “the bitter cup” to say more than he could say and humans understand. We join him, therefore, in feeling and saying, “glory be to the Father!” (DC 19.¹⁹)

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

3 Nephi 17.¹¹⁻¹⁸

¹¹And *he commanded that their little children should be brought. ¹²So they brought their little children and set them down upon the ground round about him, and Jesus stood in the midst; and the multitude gave way till they had all been brought unto him. ¹³*When they had all been brought, and Jesus stood in the midst, he commanded the multitude that they should kneel down upon the ground. ¹⁴And *when they had knelt upon the ground, Jesus groaned within himself, and said: “Father, I am troubled because of the wickedness of the people of the house of Israel.”

¹⁵And when he had said these words, he himself also knelt upon the earth; and behold he prayed unto the Father, and the things which he prayed cannot be written, and the multitude did bear record who heard him. ¹⁶And after this manner do they bear record: The eye hath never seen, neither hath the ear heard, before, so great and marvelous things as we saw and heard Jesus speak unto the Father; ¹⁷and no tongue can speak, neither can there be written by any man, neither can the hearts of men conceive so great and marvelous things as we both saw and heard Jesus speak; and no one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls at the time we heard him pray for us unto the Father.

¹⁸*When Jesus had made an end of praying unto the Father, he arose; but so great was the joy of the multitude that they were overcome.

meditation

As part of his at-one-ment and, indeed, as the culmination of his at-one-ment, Jesus ascended into heaven to sit on the right hand of God. From there, he would rule until “he hath put all things under his feet.”³⁷ But, in addition to this “cosmic” lordship, Jesus plays another much more personal and intimate role. From his privileged position at the right hand of God, Jesus “maketh intercession for us.”³⁸

Jesus often fulfilled this role in individual’s lives during his ministry. When Jesus visited the Nephites after his resurrection, he offered a profound and moving example of the sort of intercession he offers at the right hand of God. As the assembled multitude offered up their own prayers to God, Jesus himself joined with them in prayer to the Father. He prayed with and for them. The words that he prayed were so great and so marvelous that even the most eloquent among them found it impossible to repeat them. Inconceivable was the joy that those present felt at hearing, as it were, their names escape his lips, ascend into heaven, and enter the ears of the Father.

We, like them, are encouraged to pray. We, like them, can have Jesus as partner in our prayer. We, like them, can know that from his privilege place at the right hand of God he speaks our name to Father and advocates for our welfare, our happiness, our victory, and, ultimately, our advancement. Yes, this “praying in the name of Jesus” is more than formula. It is invitation for him to bow next to us and become a partner in our prayers.

Oh, what joy there is in having him right there beside us, joining us in prayer, having our petitions become his. Yes, what a marvelous, a magnificent, a perfect advocate he is!

Evens so, come, Lord Jesus!

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 15.²⁷

³⁸ Romans 8.¹⁴

3 Nephi 27.³⁰⁻³²

³⁰And now, behold, my joy is great, even unto fulness, because of you, and also this generation; yea, and even the Father rejoiceth, and also all the holy angels, because of you and this generation; for none of them are lost. ³¹Behold, I would that ye should understand; for I mean them who are now alive of this generation; and none of them are lost; and in them I have fulness of joy.

³²But behold, it sorroweth me because of the fourth generation from this generation, for they are led away captive by him even as was the son of perdition; for they will sell me for silver and for gold, and for that which moth doth corrupt and which thieves can break through and steal. And in that day will I visit them, even in turning their works upon their own heads.

meditation 1

We are all certainly heartened when we read Jesus confess, “my joy is great, even unto fulness, *because of you, and also this generation*; yea, and even the Father rejoiceth, and also all the holy angels...” How bright and wonderful this expression is! How amazing to think that a puny human, who, even “at his best state is altogether vanity” (Ps. 49.⁵), or a nation that is to God “as a drop of a bucket” and is “counted as the small dust of the balance” (Is. 40.¹⁵), can gladden the heart of an infinitely happy God.

As we contemplate this wonder, it is likely that we all also hope that the same might be said of us; that Jesus is pleased with and because of us. We might wish to simply stop reading, stay put, and bask in the glow of the Savior’s joy. It is good news indeed.

But the text allows no such repose. Sorrow immediately intrudes into our happy thoughts and invades the Savior’s present joy. We hate to see that “but.” But, there is no escaping it. “*But*,” laments the Savior, “behold, it sorroweth me because of the fourth generation from this generation.” And we all wonder, or should, “What is it about this ‘fourth generation’ that brings such sorrow to the heart of God?” We might begin to make a list in our minds of the potential sin and wickedness that could turn God’s heart dark with sorrow.

The woman on T.V. asks, “What’s in your wallet?” Here, we ask, What’s on your list?”

Here’s what’s on Jesus’ list.

Silver
Gold
Stuff moths can eat
Stuff thieves can steal

Translation: MATERIALISM.

Lest we imagine that we are seeing things that aren’t there; that this can’t be the reason for the fourth generation’s collapse or the cause of Jesus’ sorrow...

“And now, in this two hundred and first year there began to be among them those who were lifted up in pride, such as the wearing of costly apparel, and all manner of fine pearls, and of the fine things of the world. And from that time forth they did have their goods and their substance no more common among them. And they began to be divided into classes; and they began to build up churches unto themselves to get gain, and began to deny the true church of Christ” (4 Ne. 1.²⁴⁻²⁶).

The beginning of the end. The gateway to perdition.

Yes, we might be surprised at how short Jesus' list is. We might be surprised at the items found on it. We were, perhaps, expecting something far worse. Witnessing the near total absence of warnings about the sorrow this list brings God, one would think the items on the list were mere trifling offences. Given the honor that is heaped upon those most skilled in financial acquisition, one might even come to think of it as good; something godly.

But, materialism is not godly. Nowhere near. It is not a trifling matter. It is no small sin. It is huge, Gigantic. It hardly gets worse. It is the foundation, or root, of all evil (See 1 Tim. 6.¹⁰). As Jesus warns his disciples here, materialism is like slavery. Materialism ushers in a day of visitation. Materialism comes down on the head of its practitioners like a ton of bricks. Worst still— and perhaps most shocking to all too many—it is related, brother and sister to, perdition.

Given the world in which we live, this is not good news. It is extraordinarily bad news. Our society is awash in materialism. Flooding in its deluge. But there is good news. There is a fix. God, in his mercy, provides the economic fix to the perdition problem materialism presents. It is best articulated in, roughly, the middle third of the Doctrine and Covenants: say, Sections 37-82. Now, how's that for promotion? Go ahead. Have a look. See what you find there. It isn't an easy fix, as history, even our own LDS history, demonstrates. But it's a fix. And, surely, it's better than perdition.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Ether 3.²

²O Lord, thou hast said that we must be encompassed about by the floods. Now behold, O Lord, and do not be angry with thy servant because of his weakness before thee; for we know that thou art holy and dwellest in the heavens, and that we are unworthy before thee; because of the fall our natures have become evil continually; nevertheless, O Lord, thou hast given us a commandment that we must call upon thee, that from thee we may receive according to our desires.

meditation

“Nevertheless.” Even under normal circumstances, it’s a long word, what with its 12 letters and 3 words rolled into one. But in its present context, it is whoppingly huge. God, the petitioner knows, is “holy.” There is no one to compare. This incomparable God lives in a realm that is unfathomably large and complex to the human mind. On the other hand, the petitioner knows all too well the “weakness” that dwells within himself and that is so evident to that Holy One.

As to his own nature, that same petitioner must confess, as a matter of fact and objective truth, that it is “evil continually.” So how does such a one become a petitioner of the Holy One? How can he approach God in any degree of faith and hope? How does he dare to ask that Holy Being for anything—great or small—with an expectation of obtaining? He can dare because he has heard and well understood that one, big word: “nevertheless.”

Notwithstanding (another long, multi-word wrap) our nature, God has generously invited us to approach him and make our desires known. This invitation is accompanied by the promise that he will hear and respond. While our deeds, our acts, our works may not warrant a response, our desires do. Oh, how very hard it is to wrap our brains around such divine extravagance. And with that, we end our little meditation as we began it... with another big, 12 letter word: extravagance.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Ether 12.^{32-34 & 41}

³²And I also remember that thou hast said that thou hast prepared a house for man, yea, even among the mansions of thy Father, in which man might have a more excellent hope; wherefore man must hope, or he cannot receive an inheritance in the place which thou hast prepared. ³³And again, I remember that thou hast said that thou hast loved the world, even unto the laying down of thy life for the world, that thou mightest take it again to prepare a place for the children of men. ³⁴And now I know that this love which thou hast had for the children of men is charity; wherefore, except men shall have charity they cannot inherit that place which thou hast prepared in the mansions of thy Father.

⁴¹And now, I would commend you to seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written, that the grace of God the Father, and also the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of them, may be and abide in you forever. Amen.

meditation

Elsewhere, Moroni, the translator of today's passage, will declare that "charity is the pure love of Christ" (Mor. 7.⁴⁷). In his telling, then, charity can mean, 1) Christ's love for others, mortal and immortal; 2) Our love for Christ; and 3) the kind of love Christ has that is possessed by others toward others. There is no doubt that we must love Christ (2) and love others with a Christ-like love (3). But we sometimes gloss over our need to embrace the first aspect of Charity—Christ's love for us.

The apostle John reminds us that "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 Jn. 4.¹⁹). This should squash any self-righteousness we may possess about whatever humble successes we may have in following him. We didn't start the fire, as Billy Joel reminded us a couple of decades ago.

"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 4.¹⁰).

We are able to possess a pure love for Christ only because he has exhibited, and we have accepted his pure love for us. We can purely love others only because and as we see what his love, extended to us, looks and feels like. This is utter and complete dependence. It might seem that accepting Christ's love is a no brainer. Who would not? Yet, Jesus himself calls it a "labor."

"This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent" (Jn. 6.²⁹).

For some, the suggestion of our utter dependence upon him is humiliating. It is thus resisted through "another gospel" (See Gal. 1.^{6 ff}); a "gospel" that often and inordinately exalts "man" and his capacities and goodness. Korihor was one such resistor. Rather than acknowledge his dependence upon another, he created a system of "salvation" in which "every man a fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength..." (Al. 30.¹⁷). But such rhetorical resistance cannot camouflage the private rebellion that lurks in the darkness.

"Thou art angry, O Lord, with this people, because they will not understand thy mercies which thou hast bestowed upon them because of thy Son" (Al. 33.¹⁶).

Note, please, it isn't that they can't understand his "mercies." It is that "they *will not* understand." It is a choice. Hence, Ether's warning, "wherefore, except men shall have charity they cannot inherit that place which thou hast prepared in the mansions of thy Father." Father's mansions are inhabited by those who accept and take possession of Christ's love for them notwithstanding the potential

humiliating implications of their own insufficiencies and their requisite utter dependence upon another for their eternal wellbeing.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!