



the great and spacious building

1 nephi 8.^{26-27, 33}

Introduction

I suppose that many of you, like me, recently studied Lehi's great and highly symbolic dream of the tree of life, followed by Nephi's fourteen¹ Spirit/angel-directed visions meant to help Nephi understand the dream and its symbolism. The dream is known as "The Tree of Life Vision" for good reason. The tree is, to be sure, the focus, the central figure of the dream. To Lehi's discerning eyes, the tree is "desirable to make one happy." Its fruit is "most sweet," "white, to exceed all... whiteness," and "desirable above all other fruit."²

After seeing the tree for himself, Nephi agrees with his father's lofty assessment.

"The beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty, and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow."³

It is, he confesses, "precious above all."⁴

¹ I understand the thirteen times that the angel directed Nephi to "Look" as a series of thirteen visions related to Lehi's dream and its interpretation. These thirteen explanatory visions are preceded by an introductory vision. Thus, I divide Nephi's visions as follows: 11.¹⁻⁷, 11.⁸⁻¹¹, 11.¹²⁻¹⁹, 11.²⁰⁻²³, 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, 15.¹⁸⁻³⁰

² See 1 Nephi 8.¹⁰⁻¹²

³ 1 Nephi 11.⁸

⁴ 1 Nephi 11.⁹

Lehi's and Nephi's high estimation of the tree seems further justified when Nephi comes to understand the tree as a representation of "the love of God." Nephi testifies that

"It is the most desirable above all things."⁵

The angel, himself caught up in the rapture the tree's beauty produces, joins the celebration: "Yea, and the most joyous to the soul."⁶

It is all enough to make one's mouth water; make one's soul yearn.

Yet, in the dream itself, not everyone agrees with Lehi's, Nephi's, and the angel's inspired assessments. There are other enticements that, in the view of some, compete with and even surpass those that the tree and its fruit offer. Perhaps this disagreement over the value of the tree plays a role in Lehi's later expressed understanding of and appreciation for the fact that "it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things."⁷

"Laman and Lemuel partook not of the fruit,"⁸ Lehi reports. This notice follows Lehi's announcement that he had, in his dream, seen "a great and spacious building." He devotes little time to describing the obviously impressive building, except to say that "it stood as it were in the air, high above the earth."⁹ Here, we might recall the Apostle Paul's warning that "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."¹⁰

But, it is, it seems, the people inside the building that capture Lehi's imagination. The building, he informs us "was filled with people, both old and young, both male and female." Further, "their manner of dress was exceedingly fine." The building's inhabitants were positively multitudinous. The large and diverse multitude was, at least in one aspect, united. Together, they pointed "the finger of scorn at me and those that were partaking of the fruit

⁵ 1 Nephi 11.²²

⁶ 1 Nephi 11.²³

⁷ 2 Nephi 2.¹¹

⁸ 1 Nephi 8.³⁵

⁹ 1 Nephi 8.²⁶

¹⁰ Ephesians 6.¹²

also.”¹¹

Obviously, there were multitudes of people, all sorts of people, who were not interested in the tree or its fruit. They had, it seems, found something that they deemed more desirable. It is the great and spacious building, its multitude, and the multitude’s discovery, false though it may be, of something more desirable than the tree that is the subject of this homily.

The world’s wisdom, pride, and vain imagination

We have Nephi and the angel who tutored him to thank for advancing our understanding of the great and spacious building and its inhabitants beyond that which Lehi’s brief recapitulation of his dream reveals. After directing Nephi seven times to “Look”— each time showing Nephi some aspect of the Savior: his birth, life, and ministry—the angel directs Nephi for an eighth time to “Look!” When Nephi looks, he witnesses another aspect of the Savior’s life and ministry—his death. Nephi sees “the Lamb of God... taken by the people; yea, the Son of the everlasting God was judged of the world; and...was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world.”¹² But this eighth vision does not end there. The angel gives Nephi insight into “the world,” the “inspiration” behind its violent assault upon the Lamb of God, and its unrelenting hostility to all things divine.

Nephi sees that, unsatisfied with its first innocent victim, “the multitudes of the earth” are at war. They follow up their murder of God by fighting “against the apostles of the Lamb.” With these horrific scenes in his mind, Nephi makes a sudden return to his father’s vision and the great and spacious building that had threateningly hovered over the glories and joys of Lehi’s promising dream.

“And the multitude of the earth was gathered together; and I beheld that they were in a

¹¹ See 1 Nephi 8.²⁷⁻³³

¹² 1 Nephi 11.³²⁻³³. We often understand this and other instances of Jesus’ being “slain for the sins of the world,” to mean that Jesus was slain to overcome and wipe out sins committed by the inhabitants of the world. Scripture is pretty clear that he does indeed blot out the penitent’s sins. But, there is another way to read this “slain for the sins of the world.” He was slain because of sin. He was slain by a sinful world. God, the Father, did not kill Jesus. Sinful humankind chose to kill him.

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....’ 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....”¹³

We learn much here, but we wish to draw special attention to a couple of points. First, we learn that the great and spacious building represents “worldly wisdom” and “worldly pride.” Later in Nephi’s visions, the angel will expand Nephi’s understanding, teaching him that “the large and spacious building... is vain imaginations and the pride of the children of men.”¹⁴ Second, we learn that “the multitudes of the earth” that are responsible for Jesus’ death are the same multitudes that occupy the great and spacious building. It is, then, the multitudes that inhabit the great and spacious building—or the perverted wisdom, pride and imagination that the building represents—that kill Jesus.

Worldly wisdom.

Worldly pride.

Vain imaginations.

Now, perhaps, in your personal study, you reflected upon this triad of evil; this triumvirate of false and violent rule. Perhaps your Sunday School class discussion spent some time discussing “pride,” or “wisdom,” or “vanity.” If so, I hope you had more luck than I did. We made rather a mess of it, I’m afraid. “Pride” became a personal character flaw; an overbearing confidence or arrogance—hubris. The brief discussion on “wisdom” focused on how wisdom is the proper application of truth, fact. And poor old “vain imaginations” didn’t rate a moment of investigation.

I would just like to add my two cents worth, here, about this often ignored and more often misunderstood ruling triumvirate: worldly wisdom, worldly pride, and vain imaginations.

¹³ 1 Nephi 11.³⁵⁻³⁶

¹⁴ 1 Nephi 12.¹⁸

Mine will not and should not be the final word, the be all and do all of this terrible triad. But it is one that should not go unrecognized, be overlooked, or ignored.

the pride of the world

The three members of our undiscerning triad have much in common. They overlap in significant ways. However, as an organizing principle, we will treat each separately. In considering the middle member of our unholy triumvirate—the pride of the world—we ask: “What is meant by the ‘pride of the world,’ or, put differently, the ‘world’s pride?’” In order to understand, myself, and help my students understand this ‘pride of the world,’ I have found it helpful to rephrase the question like this: “In what does the world take pride?” Maybe this rephrasing will provide the reader with a new insight or two. Maybe another question or two will also be helpful.

What would it mean, for example, if I said that I have pride in my son or daughter? I love them, certainly. I find joy and a sense of fulfilment in them. But this “pride” is not simply private, something in which I engage all by myself in the solitary confines of my own mind. It is also public. I like the way my son or daughter look to others and the way they “look on me.” Others think better of them and me because of my son or daughter’s goodness. So, we might think of the pride of the world as those things that, we feel, make us look good to others. In the world’s estimation, what sorts of things make us look good to others? What sorts of things bring prestige? These would be the things that constitute the pride of the world, the world’s pride, or that in which the world takes pride.

Here, we come to another triumvirate: prestige inducing wisdom/skill/knowledge, wealth, and power. Nearly every deceitful temptation, which the great and spacious building certainly represents in Lehi’s dream, can be boiled down to the desire for one or these three “achievements” or “acquisitions.” Let’s have a look at a few scripture passages that address this triumvirate.

Shortly before Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem, and for some time thereafter, the Prophet

Jeremiah ministered to the city's inhabitants. He actively and vociferously lambasted Jewish society for what was to his way of thinking the dominate private and societal sin: idolatry. Idolatry is many things, but among its core features is an overly high estimation of the value of some person, place, or thing—especially *visa via* God. The idolater devalues God as a source, nay, *the* source of all real joy, satisfaction, security, personal worth, and fulfillment. Time, money, and effort are transferred from serving God and his children to serving the person, place, or thing deemed essential to one's happiness.¹⁵

In his critique of idolatry, Jeremiah offers this counsel.

”Thus saith the LORD,
Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,
neither let the mighty man glory in his might,
let not the rich man glory in his riches:
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.”¹⁶

Humankind is an insecure lot. We crave “glory,” self-worth, approval, and prestige. As we seek to acquire a sense of control, of security, of self-worth, and of prestige and being, we have, Jeremiah suggests, two choices. On the one hand, we can seek after a (false) “glory” through the acquisition and exercise of some environment-altering, prestige-producing wisdom/skill/knowledge, power, or wealth—or in trusting those individuals and institutions that possess and promise such wisdom/skills/knowledge, powers, and financial rewards. On the other hand, we can find true joy, security, a real sense of self-worth, and an enduring sense of being in God and his divine attributes of “personal fidelity, justice, and commitment to doing right.”

¹⁵ With this understanding of idolatry, there simply can be no doubt whatsoever that a large portion of American “Christianity,” especially the variety known as “evangelical, have made an idol of the current American president, a.k.a., Caligula.

¹⁶ Jeremiah 9.²³⁻²⁴

Jeremiah's "wisdom/skills/knowledge, power, and wealth," along with the worldly prestige that they garner, constitute a central pillar of the pride of the world represented by Lehi's "great and spacious building. These are the things in which the world takes pride. These are the things over which the world goes gaga. If this was ever in doubt, a single honest look at our current culture of celebrity worship and imitation should forever put a dagger in the heart of such doubt.

Now, as timely and illustrative as Jeremiah's warning is in relation to Lehi's "great and spacious building," i.e., Nephi's "pride of the world," we should be able to enhance our appreciation of Nephi's insight into the great and spacious building by looking closely at any literary context that is local to Lehi's dream and Nephi's interpretation. We will want, especially, to look closely inside the series of fourteen visions that the angel of the Lord uses to tutor Nephi.

We find the following in Nephi's twelfth vision.

"*I saw among the nations of the Gentiles the formation of a great church. And 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.'

"*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. And also for the praise of the world do they destroy the saints of God, and bring them down into captivity.'"¹⁷

¹⁷ 1 Nephi 13.⁴⁻⁹. The * represents the deletion of the omnipresent "and it came to pass," which, other than serving as a sign of "Hebraism," I find to be meaningless and distracting.

As with the earlier passage from Jeremiah—indeed, as with all passages of scripture—there is much more here than we can discuss in a single homily. However, I would like to make the following observations.

First, it does not seem unreasonable to see this “great and abominable church,” as a reflection—if not, indeed, an exact replica—of the great and spacious building. Note the “church’s” economic “desires”—“gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing”—are principle among those things in which the world takes pride. Here, we have Jeremiah’s “riches.” Then there is the angel’s observation that “for the praise of the world do they destroy the saints of God, and bring them down into captivity.” Here we have the exercise of “power” not only for cruelty’s sake (to “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”) but, just as importantly, “for the praise of the world”—prestige. Here are two more items in which the world takes pride: power and the exercise thereof, and prestige, Jeremiah’s “glory.”

Second, we should not read “church,” as it is thought of in society today—a strictly “religious” enterprise and “sacred” space. In ancient cultures, including that of Jeremiah’s and Nephi’s time, religious institutions played political, economic, judicial, and many other “secular” roles in culture. By Jeremiah’s lights, America’s “Wall Street” would be thought of in “religious” terms and would qualify as part of the “great and abominable church”—especially when he observed the “reverence” with which it is viewed and the “hopes” that are placed in its machinations. The great and abominable church is, then, any institution—sacred or secular—that exercises self-serving power, especially with the intent to acquire economic advantages and public prestige.

Finally, I would like to comment on the great and abominable church’s labor in “slaying,” “torturing,” “binding,” and “yoking” the “saints of God” in the hopes of “bringing them down into captivity.” There is no doubt that throughout history, individuals and institutions have utilized violent means to acquire coveted worldly resources. It is terribly significant—a significance that we ignore at our own peril—that the very first story Genesis tells about mortal beings is one in which one brother kills another in order to acquire his flocks and

cannibalize his sense of selfhood.¹⁸ Indeed, according to one recounting of the story, the lesson that the murderer learned is that one can “murder [read, “use violence”] and get gain.”¹⁹ Indeed, this “knowledge” and the use of violence to get ahead is, perhaps, one of the “great and spacious building’s” greatest, most prized aspects of its wisdom/skills/knowledge.

So, I would not want to diminish the very real, harmful, hateful, and damning physical violence that powerful individuals and institutions—sacred and secular—have perpetrated and continue to perpetrate against more vulnerable individuals and institutions for acquisitive purposes. Having said that, there is more than one way to skin a cat, or, in this instance, to slay, torture, bind, and yoke to bring about “captivity.” By preaching/ advertising that joy and security, a sense of self-worth and well-being are found in acquiring wealth, power, wisdom/skills/knowledge, and the prestige that flows from them, the great and abominable church or the great and spacious building encourages attitudes and behaviors that, in the end, are captivating. It can be a torturous project to keep up with the Jones. Worries abound. It can bring a quick and “painless” spiritual death as one labors to acquire a prestige to match or surpass that of the Jones.

So, we must not get hung up solely on the physical violence of “the Church,” or idolatrous institutions. Indeed, as Jesus warned, “

“Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”²⁰

We have seen that those who inhabit Lehi’s great and spacious building are those who idolatrously reject the fruit of the tree of life while pathologically seeking the pride of the world, or the things in which the world takes pride—prestige creating wisdom/skills

¹⁸ This is what I hear from the united reading of Genesis account of Cain and Abel and that of Moses. The account in Moses focuses on the flocks that Cain steals from Abel. Genesis’ account focuses on Cain’s interest in Abel’s sense of being, or worth. Taken together, we are reminded that our sense of worth often flows from our material gains—gains that we often attribute more often than not, falsely, to our “election” by God.

¹⁹ Moses 5.³¹

²⁰ Matthew 10.²⁸

/knowledge, wealth, and power. We have seen that Laman and Lemuel refused to eat from the tree, thus, by implication, partaking of the great and spacious building's lies about what is of ultimate value. We hear their perverted value system in their very first complaint as interpreted and recorded by Nephi.

“They did murmur in many things against their father, because he was a visionary man, and had led them out of the land of Jerusalem, *to leave the land of their inheritance, and their gold, and their silver, and their precious things*, to perish in the wilderness. And this they said he had done because of the foolish imaginations of his heart.”²¹

Later, upon hearing Nephi's plan to build a ship, they complain, among other things,

“These many years we have suffered in the wilderness, which time *we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance*; yea, and we might have been happy.”²²

Laman and Lemuel are faced with two competing systems of “imagination”: that of their father and that of the world. Lehi “imagines” a world in which the love of God is the overriding source of joy, and security, self-worth, and being. The world “imagines” that wisdom/skill/knowledge, wealth, and power that bring prestige are the overriding sources of such joy, security, self-worth, and being.

In ministering to his people, Nephi later returns to the powerful imagery of the great and spacious building, or the great and abominable church. Here we find all the elements that we have identified as “the pride of the world,” or “those things in which the world takes pride.” Again, we should read “churches” from the broader ancient perspective..

“For the time speedily shall come that all churches which are *built up to get gain*, and all those who are *built up to get power* over the flesh, and those who are *built up to become popular* in the eyes of the world, and those who *seek the lusts of the flesh and the things*

²¹ 1 Nephi 2.¹¹. Emphasis added.

²² 1 Nephi 17.²¹. Emphasis added.

*of the world,*²³ and to do all manner of iniquity; yea, in fine, all those who belong to the kingdom of the devil are they who need fear, and tremble, and quake; they are those who must be brought low in the dust; they are those who must be consumed as stubble; and this is according to the words of the prophet.”²⁴

the world's wisdom

We will now turn our attention to the “wisdom” of the world, or “worldly wisdom.” As mentioned already, we should not be surprised to see some overlap with the “pride of the world.” As before, we start with an obvious question or two. “What is meant by worldly ‘wisdom’?” “For what purpose/s does the world use it’s ‘wisdom’?” “To what evidence/s does the world look for a demonstration that one is in possession of ‘wisdom’?”

Nephi has already taught us that among its sins, the great and spacious building is heavily involved in what he calls worldly “wisdom.”²⁵ His older, Old World contemporary, Jeremiah, warned the “wise man” not to “glory in his wisdom.” Jeremiah’s Hebraic idea of “wisdom” concerns the possession of some knowledge, skill, or aptitude. Such knowledge, skill, or aptitude allows individuals to influence and shape the world around them in such a way as to be to their benefit. This “wisdom,” knowledge, skill, or aptitude brings power, wealth, and “glory” or prestige into the life of the “wise.”

Many years ago, I sat at a university’s library table studying. I had dozens of vocabulary cards scattered about the table in front of me as I learned Biblical Hebrew. Another, older student, who happened to be my elders quorum president, saw me and came over to say hello. Noticing the vocabulary cards spread about, he asked, “What are you doing?”

“Studying Hebrew,” I replied.

²³ It is indicative of our tragic preoccupation with sex that the “lusts of the flesh” are dominated by sexual acts. The flesh “lusts” after much, much more than a few minutes of periodic sexual ecstasy.

²⁴ 1 Nephi 22.²³

²⁵ 1 Nephi 11.³⁵⁻³⁶

“Why?”

When, dumbfounded at the question, I did not answer right away, he asked his follow up question. “What are you going to do with that?”

“Well, I hope to be a religion teacher or professor. I figure I should know Hebrew,” I said reasonably, “if I am going to pretend to master and teach the Hebrew Bible.”

“Well,” he said, almost, it seemed, disgustedly, “How are you going to support a family doing that? Very irresponsible.” Then he said the words appropriate to our discussion. “I thought you were wiser than that.”

This elders quorum president—undoubtedly later quite pleased and “successful” with his business degree—could not image any wisdom that did not involve acquiring sums, perhaps vast sums of money. How would I serve—too often equated with the exercise of power—without money? How would I be noticed? If a “skill” or “knowledge set” did not produce mammon, what was it good for?

This is “worldly wisdom.” The “wisdom” that the great a spacious building possesses and prizes is that which achieves wealth, power, and prestige. All its knowledge; all its skills and aptitudes are devoted to acquiring the things of this world, which, it is falsely believed and hoped, will bring joy, security, and a sense of self-worth and being. The world judges the level of wisdom one possesses based upon the level of accumulated wealth, power, and prestige.

Such wisdom truly is, as Jeremiah observed, the substance of an idol.

Vain imaginations

As we turn our attention to the “vain imaginations” that are signified by the great and spacious building, we will find, once more, some degree of overlap with the pride of the

world and the wisdom of the world.

Imagination is an amazing feature of human beings. I do not know if any other of God's creations on earth possess it. It is, at least in part, the ability to conceive of some reality that does not currently exist or is not evident to the present viewer. So, we might think of a "vain imagination" as one that imagines the existence of something that, in fact, cannot exist. The occupants of the great and spacious building use their imagination toward acquiring impossible objectives.

Alma will later warn that we are not to imagine that wickedness can produce true happiness, security, self-worth, or a sense of being.²⁶ But those in the great and spacious building imagine that the acquisition of those things in which the world takes pride will, in fact, bring such a sense of well-being. They imagine that they can use their wisdom, their skill sets to acquire a sense of well-being.

If we return to Laman and Lemuel, we see "vain imagination" at work. You will remember their complaint that "*we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance; yea, and we might have been happy.*"²⁷

Note the nature of their imagination: happiness comes through possessions and inheritance. Thankfully, we need not rely on some philosophical postulate to understand the hollowness of Laman and Lemuel's imagination. We know with absolute certainty that the happiness Laman and Lemuel imagine is vain, devoid of substance. How can we assert such certainty? Because, in very fact, the nation in which these possessions and this inheritance existed no longer existed. The nation of Judah with its capital city of Jerusalem lays in ruins, depopulated by the mighty Babylonian empire. It is, therefore, impossible that they might have been happy in the enjoyment of their possessions and land of inheritance.

Laman and Lemuel's imagination is not only "vain" but oppositional. Lehi has an imagination too. Because it contradicts that of Laman and Lemuel, they consider it

²⁶ See Alma 41.¹⁰

²⁷ 1 Nephi 17.²¹. Emphasis added.

“foolish.”²⁸ What does Lehi imagine? First, he imagines happiness without possessions or inheritances. He imagines happiness outside of Judah and Jerusalem. He can imagine all of this because he can imagine a future Judah laying in ruins a decade or so later.

The great and spacious building’s occupants’ imagination that acquiring prestige-granting wisdom, wealth, and power is empty. No matter how they use their imagination, no matter how much wisdom or wealth or power or prestige their imagination may bring to them, it will not produce the sense of well-being they so desperately want and seek above all else.

their manner of dress was exceedingly fine

We cannot leave Lehi’s dream or the interpretation that Nephi provides without considering one other observation that Lehi makes about the great and spacious building’s occupants. The Book of Mormon writers who follow Nephi use this observation as a bell-wether. Through it, they use their imagination to look into the hearts of those they serve and to predict what the future may hold for their respective societies.

First, Lehi’s observation. In observing those who inhabit the great and spacious building, Lehi notes that “their manner of dress was exceedingly fine.” This coincides with Nephi’s observation about the great and abominable church with its obsession with “silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing.” In addition to, and in association with this observation about “fashion,” Lehi observes “they were in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers...” Now, there is nothing wrong with being well dressed—what Alma calls “neat and comely.”²⁹ But costly apparel? That’s a big no-no, and, as far as the authors of the Book of Mormon are concerned, a tale-tell sign of inner personal apostasy and looming societal collapse.

For example, soon after his “election” as Chief Judge, Alma observes that

²⁸ 1 Nephi 2.¹¹. Emphasis added.

²⁹ Alma 1.²⁷

“Those who did not belong to their church did indulge themselves in sorceries, and in idolatry or idleness, and in babblings, and in envyings and strife; *wearing costly apparel*; being lifted up in the pride of their own eyes; persecuting, lying, thieving, robbing, committing whoredoms, and murdering, and all manner of wickedness...”³⁰

This wearing of “costly apparel” has some interesting associates, don’t you think, being spoken of in the same breath as such heinous behavior as sorcery and murder? And like the occupants of the great and spacious building with their “mocking” attitude and their “finger of scorn,” Alma’s fellow citizens “persecute” others. We will have more to say about this “persecution” in a moment.

Unfortunately, it would not be long before members of the church begin to follow the poor example of those who did not belong to the church.

*In the eighth year of the reign of the judges, that the people of the church began to wax proud, because of their exceeding riches, and *their fine silks, and their fine-twined linen*, and because of their many flocks and herds, and their gold and their silver, and all manner of precious things, which they had obtained by their industry; and in all these things were they lifted up in the pride of their eyes, for they *began to wear very costly apparel*.”³¹

Note the conjunction, “for.” “*FOR* they began to wear very costly apparel.” The costly apparel is an outward sign of an inner corruption of morals. Unfortunately, the costly apparel with its inner corruption has public, societal manifestations

“Now this was the cause of much affliction to Alma, yea, and to many of the people whom Alma had consecrated to be teachers, and priests, and elders over the church; yea, many of them were sorely grieved for the wickedness which they saw had begun to be among their people. For they saw and beheld with great sorrow that the people of the church began to be lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and to set their hearts upon riches

³⁰ Alma 1.³², emphasis added

³¹ Alma 4.⁶, emphasis added

and upon the vain things of the world, that they *began to be scornful, one towards another, and they began to persecute* those that did not believe according to their own will and pleasure.”³²

Alma’s people, like the inhabitants of the great and spacious building are scornful of others and engage in “persecution.” Now, we most often think of “persecution” in terms of one group attacking another over religious beliefs. But persecution can, and almost certainly does here, have an economic element. Some in the church did not believe that financial resources should be devoted to self-gratification, represented here by “costly apparel.” Others found such beliefs quaint and, worse, likely felt judged for their obsession with self-gratification.

Later in the Book of Mormon we meet a group of people known as the Zoramites, famous for their absurd Rameumptom. Among their numerous sins, we witness their self-gratification, exemplified by “costly apparel,” along with the scorn that seems to accompany. After observing the Zoramite’s hypocritical religious ritual, Alma prays for divine comfort in the face of such gross and persistent sin. Alma petitions God to

*“Behold... 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...”*³³

Alma also reminds God, “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.’”³⁴ One can think of the Zoramite’s self-perception in terms of personal and societal hubris—a mere character flaw. However, it is also a form of “scorn” toward others and certainly led to “persecuting” those who felt and acted differently.

It is beyond doubt that the Savior’s visit to the Nephites is one of the most moving parts of the Book of Mormon. So moving was his visit at the time that it yielded two centuries of unparalleled righteousness, peace, and cooperation. However, as with all good things, it came

³² Alma 4.⁷⁻⁸, emphasis added

³³ Alma 31.²⁸, emphasis added

³⁴ *ibid*

to an end. In describing the beginning of the end, the inspired observer of societies left us with this witness.

“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.”³⁵

We note again the appearance of “costly apparel” as a signifier of sin. In societies’ “division into classes,” we almost certainly see the beginning of “scorn” and the persecution it produces. As in the case of the Zoramites, we also see religion utilized to justify rabid self-gratification.

Too often when we think of churches “built up... to get gain” we think of clergy profiting from their congregants. But this seems too Zoramite-like self-serving, simply serving to allow us to boast about our superiority due to our “lay” clergy. It also serves to let us hide from our own dark realities. Rather than thinking of paid versus lay ministries, we should think in terms of “doctrine.” Churches “built up... to get gain,” are those that teach that by observing their “doctrines” and practices one can expect blessings, including especially wealth, power, and prestige—the false prosperity gospel against which we have so frequently railed on the pages of this site. So we have churches built up for the primary purpose of acquiring and justifying self-gratification.

All of this is part and parcel of Lehi’s great and spacious building, or the great and abominable church. And it all begins and is used to justify, among other vile behavior, the purchase and wearing of “costly apparel,” dress and fashion that is “exceedingly fine.”

³⁵ 4 Nephi 1.²⁴⁻²⁶, emphasis added

In teaching any principle, I always strive to connect it to the most exemplary life ever lived; that of the Lord Jesus Christ. If the world's obsession with prestige inducing knowledge, wealth, and power—represented by the great and spacious building, the pride of the world—is as prevalent and tempting as this homily suggests, then we ought to see the temptation reflected in the Savior's life. If he is going to “succor” us, as we so fondly claim he does, then surely he faced this temptation so that he would know how to assist us in our resistance to its bombardment.

And face it he did. No doubt the temptation reared its ugly head repeatedly over the course of his too-short life. Matthew and Luke let one experience speak for his life-time of resistance to the pride of the world or those things in which the world takes pride. No doubt, you will remember it well.

“And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days he did eat nothing: and when they were ended, he afterward hungered. And the devil said unto him, ‘If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread.’

And Jesus answered him, saying, ‘It is written, *That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.*

And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said unto him, ‘All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine.

And Jesus answered and said unto him, ‘Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, *Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.*

And he brought him to Jerusalem, and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto him, ‘If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from hence: for it is written, *He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.*’

And Jesus answering said unto him, ‘It is said, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy

God.’

And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him for a season.”³⁶

There is far, far more here than we can discuss in the present homily. We will, perhaps, have to develop another homily devoted to this passage on its own. However, surely the reader can see in Jesus’ experience the very elements that we have identified as the great and spacious building, the pride of the world.

Wealth? What could be wealthier than to be able to create food from a rock? Of course, this would be true from a literal perspective. If I could feed the planet with as small an investment as the ever-present rock... why I’d be a trillionaire by now. But there is more to it than that.

Today, we live in a “consumer” driven economy. Anciently, economies functioned much more at the “subsistence level.” In a subsistence economy, food is the gold standard. If you can produce more food than you can eat, you are a wealthy man. So, in tempting Jesus to produce bread, Satan was tempting him to make economic matters the priority in his life. How appropriate, then, was Jesus’ response? “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.*” By “live,” of course, Jesus is talking about more than physical survival. To “live” is to be complete and whole, physically, emotionally, spiritually, etc. A true sense of self does not come by economic success but in one’s relation with God.

Power? Satan “shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time.” That’s a good deal of power. “All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them,” promises the tempter. What good could Jesus do as President of the U.S., China, Russia, etc., etc.? How tempting was that? But the cost was too high. He would have to worship Satan for the prize. Jesus understood that to buy into the notion that power is an ultimate good and to accept the power being offered was, in fact, the same as worshipping Satan. He also understood that if one was going to talk about and work for that which is of “worth,” nothing would place higher on the list than one’s relationship to and with God: “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.”

³⁶ Luke 4. 1-13

Prestige? Along with all world power, Satan offers Jesus all the prestige that would come with it. Then again, I have often wondered what Satan's plan was for Jesus' safe descent from the "pinnacle of the temple." Would there be an audience to watch as he fluttered safely down into the temple's courts? Talk about prestige inducing! And image the ticket price when he did it again, and again, and again!

But, contrary to all the claims made by churches "built up to get gain," one is not to put God to the test. "I'll obey him and then see if he comes through with the goodies. No, Jesus would have nothing to do with such idolatry. No doubt, after "the season," Satan was right back at it, repeatedly tempting Jesus to enter that great and spacious building to partake of its pride and wisdom and imagination.

Conclusion

When studying and contemplating Lehi's "Tree of Life" vision, we focus most of our attention on the tree itself. There is good reason for this focus. First, the tree is the principle figure of the dream. Second, it is magnificent. It is, according to the angel's interpretation, "the love of God." What could be worthy of more attention and focus than the love of God? Indeed, between Lehi, Nephi, and the angel, the love of God is described as "desirable to make one happy," "most sweet," "precious above all,"³⁷ "most desirable above all things,"³⁸ and "the most joyous to the soul."³⁹

Now, when we think of "the love of God," we focus primarily on "the love and commitment that God possesses for and toward us." This is reasonable. Within the interpretation of the dream, this seems to be the principle focus that is placed on "the love of God." However, this grammatical possessive could also be read and interpreted as "the love and commitment that we have of and toward God," or "the love and commitment we possess for and toward God."

³⁷ 1 Nephi 11.⁹

³⁸ 1 Nephi 11.²²

³⁹ 1 Nephi 11.²³

In our understandable attentiveness to the incredible tree with its fruit and the love of God that it represents, what we do not always notice or sufficiently examine is that within the dream there is a battle being waged for the hearts and minds of mortal men and women. There is heard in the dream a siren's song that calls out for our love. This love stands in strong competitive opposition to the tree, or the love of God. This siren's song is sung from a great and spacious building by a multitude whose manner of dress was exceedingly fine. Having been seduced by the siren's song, this multitude contemptuously demands that others join them by mocking those who continue to treasure the tree, or the love of God that it represents, above all other things.

The love that seeks to draw individuals away from the love of God is described as the world's "wisdom," "pride," and "vain imaginations." These, we have further described as this world's catalogue of knowledge, wisdom, or skill sets that advance one's ability to accumulate wealth, power, and prestige. The accumulation of these worldly offerings is thought to bring a sense of security, of joy, of peace, of self-worth, of well-being, of Being itself. The accumulation of these worldly offerings with their psychic benefits takes on an aura that looks something very much like "holiness." On another continent, half a millennium later, the apostle Paul will speak critically of those who go about "supposing that gain is godliness."⁴⁰

But Paul, Lehi, and Nephi all know that earthly gain, the accumulation of skills, wealth, power, and the prestige they bring is not "godliness." They know that though humankind builds up churches "to get gain," those institutions are idolatrous, their gods made "after the imagination of their own heart."⁴¹ These false gods demand what the true and living God invites—loyalty, commitment, and whole-hearted labor—but for far less return on the investment. With the limited amount of energy and time available to mortal beings, a choice must be made, for

"No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else

⁴⁰ 1 Timothy 6.⁵

⁴¹ Jeremiah 9.¹⁴

he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”⁴²

The world, having committed its attention, energy, time, efforts, indeed, its very Being to master Mammon, it will brook no opposition. Those who do not think and act upon its perverted values are dangerous to the cause. They are to be scorned and persecuted. Oh, how the vulnerable poor are demonized as somehow lacking in morals when it is those who demonize and harm them through false-theological doctrines that are lacking in morals!

The world loves what it loves, takes pride in what it takes pride in, imagines what it imagines. It loves and takes pride in worldly wisdom, wealth, power, and prestige. But a disciple of Christ knows that such things do not bring true joy, or peace, or security, or self-worth, or well-being, or of Being. Rather, the committed disciple of Christ, the lover of God, knows to “seek... first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto them.”⁴³

“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”⁴⁴

⁴² Matthew 6.²⁴

⁴³ Matthew 6.³³

⁴⁴ 1 John 2.¹⁵⁻¹⁷