



Knowing the calamity which should come doctrine and covenants 1

INTRODUCTION

At the very beginning of Doctrine and Covenants 1, the Lord speaks of the section as “my preface unto the book of my commandments” (vs. 6). Section 1 is, then, a preface to the entire Doctrine and Covenants. A “pre-face” is a short initial statement that attempts to “puts a face on” or briefly characterize the content that is to follow.

The Doctrine and Covenants has a message. In the work as a whole the Lord has certain emphases, objectives, and goals. These messages and objectives are vitally important. They are characterized in the preface as “the voice of warning” (vs. 4). Repeatedly, the “people of my church” (vs. 1) and, even more broadly, “people from afar” (vs. 1) even “unto the ends of the earth” (vs. 11) are admonished in the preface to “hearken,” “hearken,” “hearken” (vs. 1) to the warning “voice of the Lord” that will be found throughout the body of the work.¹

Though there might be any number of ways to do so, one useful way of structuring the section is to divide it into two parts. Verses 1-16 and 34-39 represent the Lord’s warning about the evil character of the latter days and the consequences—“calamity” in the language of Section 1—that will follow the wicked behavior of the latter day population. Sandwiched between these warnings, the Lord describes his response, his solution, his plan for dealing with latter day sin and the consequent calamity.

At its beginning and again at its end, the preface repeats the one faithful saying that is sure

¹ DC 5.19-20

above all else: Everything stated in the following revelations will be “fulfilled” (vss. 7, 37-38). There can be no doubt that the latter days will indeed see the sins and the consequences described in the book. And the Lord’s plan for dealing with those sins and consequences will be real and effective. The plan will deliver those who believe from the latter day calamities—that promise is sure. It makes no difference whether the predictions of calamity or gospel deliverance voiced by the Lord in the Doctrine and Covenants are “fulfilled” by the Lord himself, or by human agents—they “shall all be fulfilled.”

LATTER DAY SIN AND ITS CONSEQUENT CALAMITY (1-16, 34-39)

In reading verses 1-16 and 34-39 we find that the latter day sins are summarized as 1) mankind’s straying from divine ordinances (vs. 15); (2) mankind’s breaking away from protective covenants (vs. 15); and (3) mankind’s ignoring of the Lord’s desires, while focusing on “establishing” themselves and fulfilling their own desires. All of this is described as idolatry (vs. 16). In the final analysis, then, the latter days are characterized by and known for their idolatry.

In addition to summarizing latter day sin, these same verses, provide a description of consequences that flow from the persistent latter day idolatry.

- The later days are a time when nothing remains hidden. Sin is exposed. Every eye and ear sees and hears. As a result of such revelations, those who engage in wickedness find no peace but “much sorrow” as their acts are exposed for what they are (vss. 2-3).
- In the latter days “the wicked” are “sealed up,” i.e. delivered over, to the “wrath of God.” This “wrath” is “without measure.” The “wrath” is measured out upon mankind “without measure,” or “to the max” or “disproportionately” because men are disproportionate in their measuring out or “dishing things out” to their fellow man (vss. 8-10). For those who refuse to heed the warning voice, this disproportionate “wrath,” likened to a sword wielded by God and covered with human blood and gore, will hold sway until the wicked are “cut off from among the people” (13-14).²
- This limitless, disproportionate human “dishing out” will escalate and spiral out of

² See the extended discussion of this below.

control until peace flees the planet. The devil will then have all power over this satanic-inspired conflagration while, at the very same time the Lord will reign peacefully in the midst of his saints (vss. 35-36).

None of this is “gospel,” that is to say, “good news.” It can be frightening and intimidating. For some, it can be depressing. The Lord recognizes the “bad news” and names it for what it is: a calamity. We must not bury our heads in the sand and deny the ugly reality of the latter days. We must face it straight on. But we can face it straight on without becoming swept up in its wake. And we can face it with hope and faith, for the Lord “knowing [beforehand] the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth” (vs. 17) provided an antidote; a means of rescue; a better way. We can now turn from the “anti-gospel,” the bad news, to the “gospel, the good news.”

THE LORD’S RESPONSE TO AND SOLUTION FOR “THE CALAMITY”

“I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun.” We might imagine Joseph’s call to be the end, rather than a mere means. We might imagine that the calling of Joseph is the principle response, *the* solution to the latter day calamity. Such a conclusion would be careless and wrong-headed. The Lord called Joseph as a *means* to an end, not an end in and of itself. The be all and end all of the divine response is not the call of a prophet. We must read more carefully. We must read further. This statement is followed by a series of purpose statements. Joseph, with others, was called “*that* they should proclaim these things unto the world” (vs. 18; emphasis added). Ah, now we’ve gotten to the bottom of it. The principle solution to the latter day calamity is the actual warning proclamation of latter day messengers. No, we’re still not there, for there is yet another, deeper purpose statement. “*That* it might be fulfilled, which was written by the prophets—the weak things of the world shall come forth and break down the mighty and strong ones” (vs. 18-19).

With this we are getting closer to the heart of the matter and the solution to latter day sin and its consequences. The prophetic call is carried out in order to fulfill the Lord’s promises. But the promise was not “I’ll call latter day prophets to proclaim the warning.” No, the promise was a little more pointed than this. “In the latter days I intend to call ‘weak things’ to

proclaim the warning. The Lord comes back to this in verse 22: “That the fullness of my gospel might be proclaimed by the weak and simple.” But this is no more end than that which has come before it. The Lord did not say, “In the latter days I will call the ‘weak and simple’ just for the sake of calling the ‘weak and simple.’” No, calling the “weak and simple” has its own end.

“That man should not counsel his fellow man, neither trust in the arm of flesh—But that every man might speak in the name of God the Lord, even the Savior of the world; That faith also might increase in the earth.”³

It is not so much the calling of a prophet that the Lord knows will increase faith in the earth; it is the calling of “weak and simple” things. This is, not surprisingly, very insightful in regard to the nature of men in their mortal state. First, people are easily impressed with demonstrations of power, wealth, skill, knowledge, etc. They can become so enamored of human strength that they begin to put their trust in “the arm of flesh.” In his wisdom God understood that in order to keep people from “trusting in the arm of flesh”—making gods, nearly, of their fellow man—he would need to work through “weak and simple” people whom no one could ever confuse with God.

Secondly, the Lord knows the religious mind. He knows how utterly, often painfully aware we are of personal weakness. These weaknesses can, at times, be humiliating. They can make us lose confidence not only in self but in God’s capacity and willingness to work in and with and through us. If God only called and then worked with prophets who were always and only great and noble, then most of us would always be in suspense about God’s capacity to work with us. But when we see God working so ably and willingly with they who seem “to be somewhat”⁴ but are, in fact, “weak and simple,” then our belief that God can and will work in our lives grows, notwithstanding our weakness. In other words, our faith grows. In the language of the text, “faith...increases in the earth.”

As more and more people observe God’s ability and willingness to work with more and more “weak and simple” things, then more and more “weak and simple” individuals grow in their

³ Vss. 19-20

⁴ Gal. 2:6

faith. God then does not have a church with one strong prophet or minister or pastor or bishop but an entire congregation of prophets who know the Lord and “speak in the name of the Lord.” See how the Lord multiplies faith and the number of “faithful”!

The solution, then, to the calamity of the latter days is to initially, and from time to time, call a few “weak and simple” individuals so that all may see God’s willingness, ability, and even pleasure to work with weak things.⁵ Seeing this, many—many more than might have been the case if only “great and noble” ones were called—begin to exercise their faith in God believing he will work with them as well. As they then are able to trust God more fully to help them, he does help them. This help is absolutely essential if they are to withstand the latter day environment of sin and the accompanying consequences. In this way, too, the number of workers in the kingdom grows.

Before concluding, we should examine more closely one specific point.

A “SWORD BATHED IN HEAVEN”

The reader might be forgiven if they find the language, images, and stridency of verses 8-14 disturbing. Take, for example the image of the Lord with “his sword...bathed in heaven.” As one student once exclaimed: “Ooh, Gross!” We should note first that the illusion is not a

⁵ Given the Apostle Paul’s contention that God also worked after this manner in his day, we might conclude that, in fact, this is how the Lord always works.

“For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*:

“But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;

“And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, *yea*, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are:

“That no flesh should glory in his presence.

“But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

“That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1.²⁶⁻³¹).

Some centuries previous to Paul, the prophet Isaiah warned of the imminent removal of

“The mighty man, and the man of war, the judge, and the prophet, and the prudent, and the ancient, ”The captain of fifty, and the honourable man, and the counsellor, and the cunning artificer, and the eloquent orator” (Isaiah 3.²⁻³).

Why remove them? The answer is to be found in Isaiah’s “law of restoration” type warning,

“Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils: for wherein is he to be accounted of?” (Isaiah 2.²²)

Doctrine and Covenants invention. It comes from the prophet Isaiah.

“For my *sword shall be bathed in heaven*:
 behold, it shall come down upon Idumea,
 and upon the people of my curse, to judgment.
“The sword of the LORD is filled with blood,
 it is made fat with fatness,
and with the blood of lambs and goats,
 with the fat of the kidneys of rams:
for the LORD hath a sacrifice in Bozrah,
 and a great slaughter in the land of Idumea.”⁶

As the LDS footnote 13b suggests, the imagery and meaning is further informed by the twenty-first chapter of Ezekiel.

“And say to the land of Israel, Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I am against thee, and will draw forth my sword out of his sheath, and will cut off from thee the righteous and the wicked.

“Seeing then that I will cut off from thee the righteous and the wicked, therefore shall my sword go forth out of his sheath against all flesh from the south to the north....

“Again the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,

“Son of man, prophesy, and say, Thus saith the LORD; Say, A sword, a sword is sharpened, and also furbished...

“It is sharpened to make a sore slaughter; it is furbished that it may glitter...

“And he hath given it to be furbished, that it may be handled: this sword is sharpened, and it is furbished, to give it into the hand of the slayer.

“Cry and howl, son of man: for it shall be upon my people, it shall be upon all the princes of Israel: terrors by reason of the sword shall be upon my people: smite therefore upon thy thigh....

“Thou therefore, son of man, prophesy, and smite thine hands together, and let the sword be doubled the third time, the sword of the slain: it is the sword of the great men that are slain, which entereth into their privy chambers.

“I have set the point of the sword against all their gates, that their heart may faint, and

⁶ Isaiah 34.⁵⁻⁶; emphasis added

their ruins be multiplied: ah! it is made bright, it is wrapped up for the slaughter.”⁷

The Lord, then, has gone through the earth whacking away with a sword until the sword is “bathed,” or dripping with human blood and gore. This is a horrifying image and one that is difficult to reconcile with Jesus’ portrayal of God in the pages of the New Testament. Why would God act in such a “barbarous” way? Here, it may be well to recall an important principle taught by the Book of Mormon.

“The judgments of God will overtake the wicked; and it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished; for it is the wicked that stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed.”⁸

It is the “judgment” or the “decision” or, better, the “insight” of God that wicked people would punish wicked people. He does not stipulate it or demand it. He knows it and fortells it. God does not “stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed.” God does not himself shed human blood. Such behavior is diametrically opposed to his nature. The imagery of DC 1.¹³, is, then, rhetorical. God is not hacking away at human beings. It is men hacking away at men. This is the result of the “judgments of God,” the result of his knowing how fallen worlds work. God has given his judgment about violence: “Avoid it. Do not become implicated in it; for if you do it will get out of control. It will consume the planet. It will reverberate back and forth across the wide expanse of human culture and society.”

How and why this works is found in another passage from DC 1 that some find difficult and troubling: “the wrath of God shall be poured out upon the wicked *without measure*.” Why would “wrath” be poured out to such an extent that it could not be measured? Why would it be poured out in an “unmeasured” way? This is consistent with another of God’s “judgments.” Jesus said it like this:

⁷ Ezekiel 21.³⁻¹⁵

⁸ Mormon 4.⁵

“For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.”⁹

This is a restatement of a frequently taught Old Testament principle.

“The heathen are sunk down in the pit *that* they made:
in the net which they hid is their own foot taken.”¹⁰

“They have prepared a net for my steps;
my soul is bowed down:
they have digged a pit before me,
into the midst whereof they are fallen *themselves*. Selah.”¹¹

Today we would say that “what goes around comes around.” It is the way the world works. Generally, we are treated the way we treat others. The Book of Mormon gives this principle a name—the law of restoration—and indicates it is almost cosmic in its reach.

“O, my son, this is not the case; but the meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous; just for that which is just; merciful for that which is merciful.

“Therefore, my son, see that you are merciful unto your brethren; deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually; and if ye do all these things then shall ye receive your reward; yea, ye shall have mercy restored unto you again; ye shall have justice restored unto you again; ye shall have a righteous judgment restored unto you again; and ye shall have good rewarded unto you again.

“For *that which ye do send out shall return unto you again*, and be restored; therefore, the word restoration more fully condemneth the sinner, and justifieth him not at all.”¹²

⁹ Matthew 7.²

¹⁰ Psalm 9.¹⁵

¹¹ Psalm 57.⁶

¹² Alma 41.¹³⁻¹⁵; emphasis added

So men experience wrath, punishment and recompense in an unmeasured way, because men themselves recompense their fellowmen in unmeasured ways. Someone involved in a car accident in which they break an arm, sues for 3 million dollars. You see, the “compensation,” the “measure” is all out of proportion to the offence.

The prediction of the Lord’s preface is that the latter days will be characterized by an escalating, spiraling-out-of-control violence. But it will not be individual. It will be institutional. It will be global until, as the DC predicts Zion “shall be the only people that shall not be at war one with another.”¹³ Individuals will interpret this violence as “the wrath of God.” It will feel as if the hand—or in this case the sword—or God is raised in blow after punishing blow. But it will all be the work of wicked men working on wicked men. This is “God’s judgment.” This is as God described it, predicted it. He could describe it beforehand because of his knowledge of men and what happens in a fallen world.

Finally, one last reminder. Though “the wicked” may “deserve” exactly what they get, the “righteous” will take no pleasure in this “judgment” and the pain, suffering, and even death it produces. Remember that Mormon, who described the “law of restoration” so accurately, said within verses of this description that he dared not

“give a full account of the things which I have seen, because of the commandments which I have received, and also that ye might not have too great sorrow because of the wickedness of this people...

For I know that such will sorrow for the calamity of the house of Israel; yea, *they will sorrow for the destruction of this people.*”¹⁴

Indeed, Ezekiel, who warned of the approaching sharpened sword that would “make a sore slaughter,” took no pleasure in it.

“Sigh therefore, thou son of man, with the breaking of thy loins; and with bitterness sigh before their eyes.

¹³ DC 45.⁶⁹

¹⁴ Mormon 5.^{9, 11}; emphasis added

“And it shall be, when they say unto thee, Wherefore sighest thou? that thou shalt answer, For the tidings; because it cometh: and every heart shall melt, and all hands shall be feeble, and every spirit shall faint, and all knees shall be weak as water: behold, it cometh, and shall be brought to pass, saith the Lord GOD.”¹⁵

This, of course, is consistent with the Lord’s own feelings. When he looked down and viewed the destruction and death wrought by the flood, he “wept.” Said he, “the whole heavens shall weep over them, even all the workmanship of mine hands; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?”¹⁶

We see in this, then, the godly response to the suffering of the “wicked.” If we would be godly, we must think and feel and act as he does. This includes our response to the suffering and death of the “wicked.”

CONCLUSION

All of this is, then, the message of the Lord’s preface. The latter days will be sinful, idolatrous, dangerous, calamitous days. In order to survive, the individual must have God as an active force in their life. In order that all may know of his willingness, ability, and pleasure to work with them in spite of their acknowledged and painful weaknesses, God chose to publically work with “weak and simple” things in the person of the Prophet Joseph Smith and those who would follow him. We glory, then, in God’s work through prophets such as Joseph, not because of its assurance of God’s skill in identifying and working through the capable (indeed, what would be the big deal of that!), but its assurance that God intends and takes pleasure in working through us, weak though we be. As we read the remainder of the Doctrine and Covenants, we should look for these themes. We shall find that they are everywhere.

¹⁵ Ezekiel 21.⁶⁻⁷

¹⁶ See Moses 7.²⁸⁻³⁷