

# The Book of Alma

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## Amateur or Professional? (Alma 1)

In Alma 1, a man named Nehor goes about, challenging the way the church operates. In particular, he promotes the concept of a paid ministry, “declaring unto the people that every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people” (Alma 1:3). Apparently, his words are quite persuasive as people begin to give him money and he becomes quite wealthy.

The concept of a minister becoming wealthy with money collected from people who think they are donating to God is quite distasteful. It’s in fact one of the things that has made people cynical when it comes to organized religion as they think that every minister is in it for the money and is cheating the poor people in the congregation.

When I was a young minister, I performed a wedding for a couple who was from our community. The church building was filled with their family members who were all strangers to us. After the wedding, one man came up to me and said, “I saw your car in the parking lot”. As I looked at him quizzically, he continued, “The Rolls Royce – that’s your car, right?”. I of course made sure he knew that the Rolls Royce was most definitely not my car but the cynicism was not lost on me – as far as he was concerned, the most expensive car in the lot must belong to the pastor.

For those who may not be aware, The Church of Jesus Christ operates with an unpaid ministry – just as in the days of Alma. Following the scriptural examples of not only Alma but also the Apostle Paul, King Benjamin and many others, the ministers of the church “labor with their own hands”, working at their own jobs to earn the money they need to live on. Whether one is an Apostle, an Evangelist or an Elder, the financial compensation from the church is the same – zero.

A minister who earns a salary might be referred to as a professional minister. But, wait a minute, what does that make a minister who does the job for no salary? An amateur? Is that what we are – amateur ministers?

We of course don’t have to accept the worldly definition that indicates that someone who is paid to do something is more qualified than someone who is not paid. Possessing the authority of God and the spirit of God qualifies our ministers to operate at the top of the profession.

However, do we as individuals approach our ministry as amateurs or as professionals? For that matter, whether we are ministers or not, do we approach our service to God as amateurs or as professionals?

In the workplace, if you hear someone make the statement that they are a professional, what they are typically saying is:

- My job requires some level of preparation (education, certification, experience) and I am sufficiently prepared to perform this job
- I am willing to continue to learn so I can do the job the best I can
- I don't do my job well just because someone is watching but because it is within me to do the job right
- I'm not an amateur who is not serious about this type of work – someone who just fools around with it from time to time

Applying the same types of statements to our ministry or service to God, we can ask ourselves:

- Are we prepared – through fasting & prayer, studying the scriptures, devoting the necessary time – to do the job?
- Are we seeking God's direction to move forward in His service?
- Do we do the job to please people or to please God?
- Or, do we just like to “play church” when the mood strikes us?

You don't need to be paid money to approach your service to God in a professional manner – Jesus has already more than paid you for whatever you can do in this life. So, don't settle for being an amateur – do your best to perform at the level of a professional servant of God and He will bless your efforts.



## Are They With Us? (Alma 2)

In Alma 2, a man named Amlici campaigns to become a king over the Nephite people, actually forcing a vote on the issue. When Amlici and the proposal to have a king are defeated in the election, Amlici takes his supporters and forms his own little kingdom anyway, eventually coming to battle against the Nephites. After the battle, Alma sends some spies to follow the remaining Amlicites and they return with the following report:

“Behold, we followed the camp of the Amlicites, and to our great astonishment,...we saw a numerous host of Lamanites; and behold, the Amlicites have joined them” (Alma 2:24)

Up until this time, Amlici and his followers had been considered fellow Nephites who had some disagreements with the government. However, this report told Alma that the Amlicites were actually not with them at all, but had joined the enemy – so they needed to be dealt with accordingly.

In The Church of Jesus Christ, we want to feel that all of our members are “with us”, not only in the United States but also in all countries in which the gospel has been spread. The challenge is not trivial as we deal with the various cultures and different needs of the people in all of these countries. The U.S.-based Evangelists and missionaries can only visit the various countries for short periods of time so we must depend upon the local leadership in each country to lead the congregations in an appropriate way.

To assist the Church in determining who is with us and who may not be, the International Missionary Operating Committee (IMOC) has developed a series of six questions that the Evangelists assigned to each country utilize to make sure that the local leaders – and therefore their congregations – are with us. Here are the questions:

- Do they understand and accept the Restored Gospel?
- Are they dedicated to The Church of Jesus Christ, not associating with other organizations?
- Do they correctly practice all ordinances of the Church?
- Do they study regularly and hold classes for the membership?
- Do they understand and support revisions to the Law and Order?
- Are they working toward self-sufficiency?

If the answer to any of the above questions is “No”, the Evangelists work with the in-country leaders to remedy the situation, perhaps through additional training or oversight. In extreme cases where it becomes clear that a leader is not with us, appropriate actions are taken.

As we look at the above questions, we can also use them for self-examination as we all should want to make sure that we stand with The Church of Jesus Christ:

- Do we understand and accept the Restored Gospel? It is what makes us different from other churches.
- Do we dedicate our personal time and energy to The Church of Jesus Christ, attending all services and other activities? Or is our personal time and energy given more to other pursuits in life?
- Do we participate in all of the ordinances? Do we make it a priority to attend church every Sunday so we can regularly partake of the Lord’s Supper? Do we participate in Feet Washing? Or is that a good Sunday to skip church?
- Do we study the scriptures, both personally and in church classes? Are the pages of our scriptures puffy or do the books still look brand new? Do we use the church app on our phones or tablets? Do we know that there is a church app?
- Rather than be put off by the term “Law and Order”, do we take advantage of the counsel offered by our church leaders who have prepared guidelines to help us apply the scriptures to various life situations?
- Do we do our best to manage our finances such that we can donate our fair share to the Church? Or do we instead depend on the church welfare fund to help support us?

Just as with our international congregations, if we find ourselves lacking in any of the above, we should do our best to improve in our service to God and strengthen our association with The Church of Jesus Christ. If the Church were to ask you, “Are You With Us?”, your actions should indicate an emphatic “YES!”.



## Equally Yoked (Alma 3)

**YOKE – A wooden bar that joins two oxen to each other and to the burden they pull**

Try to envision the arrangement described above. The two animals are connected to each other and need to move forward together, pulling a load behind them. Now, what would happen if the two oxen who are connected to each other in this way are significantly different in terms of size or strength? The weaker or shorter ox would walk more slowly than the stronger or taller one, causing the load to go around in circles. When oxen are “unequally yoked”, they cannot perform the task set before them. Instead of working together, they are at odds with one another.

The phrase “unequally yoked” is mentioned in the writing of the Apostle Paul as he gives counsel to church members regarding their choice of partners in life: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14)

This advice can be applied to any relationship in which there is some type of connection between you and another person. For example, suppose you are business partners with someone who is not a believer in Christ and your partner feels that everyone should work on Sunday – do you go along with this and forget about church or do you allow yourself to be seen as the lesser partner in the business? Decisions made in this type of relationship will be made from different perspectives so there is a high likelihood of conflict and/or severe compromise (most likely on your part).

Although the scripture quoted above can be applied to any type of relationship, it is typically applied to the husband/wife relationship.

God prefers that believers join with believers when it comes to marriage. Alma 3 speaks about how God didn’t want believing Nephites to intermarry with unbelieving Lamanites. In order to accomplish this, He changed the appearance of the Lamanites so they would be unattractive to the Nephites:

“They were cursed: and the Lord God set a mark upon them...this was done that their seed might be distinguished from the seed of their brethren, that thereby the Lord God might preserve his people, that they might not mix and believe in incorrect traditions which would prove their



destruction. And it came to pass that whosoever did mingle his seed with that of the Lamanites did bring the same curse upon his seed.” (Alma 3:7-9)

When you agree to be wed, you are agreeing to be “yoked” together with your spouse, taking on the challenges of life together. You will make decisions jointly on issues such as raising children, where to live, how to spend money, etc. If you are the only one approaching these decisions prayerfully, listening for the prompting of the Holy Ghost, you may well come to different conclusions than your unbelieving spouse who is not approaching the decisions in the same manner.

Even attending church can be a challenge as your unbelieving spouse may resent the time you spend at church. You may be expected to forego church with some frequency in order to do other things together as a couple or as a family.

Sadly, the large majority of marriages between a believer and an unbeliever either end in divorce or with the believing spouse stepping back from their service to God. Even if you manage to keep your marriage together while serving God alone, how frustrating is it to not be able to share the most important part of your life with your spouse?

Contrast to the above a marriage in which you pray together with your spouse, attend church together, share the blessings and testimonies of God’s goodness with each other, seek God’s direction for the important decisions in life together and seek opportunities to do things together for the kingdom of God. This is the type of “equally yoked” partnership that God intends for married couples.

If you’re not currently married and desire to be, seek out a spouse with whom you can be equally yoked. If you are married and are unequally yoked at this time, don’t give up – do your best to share the love of Christ with your spouse and hang onto the hope of one day being equally yoked.



## Pruning Your Tree of Life (Alma 4)

**PRUNING – Trimming (a tree, shrub or bush) by cutting away overgrown branches, especially to increase fruitfulness and growth**

When addressing His disciples at the Last Supper (John 15), Jesus used a familiar metaphor to compare His followers to the branches of a fruit tree. Branches with no fruit would be cut away but even branches bearing fruit required attention – these would be purged (or pruned) in order to allow them to bring forth even more fruit. Pruning can include cutting away twigs and leaves that are in the way but it can also include removing excess fruit that weighs down the branch and leaves no room for additional fruit to grow.

### Pruning Your Tree of Life – Phase 1

Assuming that we are servants of God and that we are doing something for the Lord and for other people – we are fruit-bearing branches – what are the “twigs and leaves” that can be cleared away to allow us to bear even more fruit?

- **Activities that waste our time** – Is there any activity that we can cut back on or eliminate that would allow more time for serving God?
- **Things that cost a lot of money** – Is there anything we can spend less money on or even live without such that we would have more money that can either be donated or can be used to fund our personal service to God?
- **Situations or causes that clutter our mind** – Can we give less focus and less of our personal energy and creativity to situations and causes that don’t really matter in terms of eternity? Can we take that same passion and direct it toward serving God? Can we take time to focus our mind in prayer and meditation and strengthening our connection with God?

### Pruning Your Tree of Life – Phase 2

There is another level of pruning that sometimes needs to be done. As mentioned above, there are times when a branch produces so much fruit that the branch is in danger of breaking. Also, when a branch reaches this point, there is no room for additional fruit to grow.

The equivalent scenario in our lives is when we are involved in so many good things that we have to limit our time and attention given to each and we have no further capacity to take on anything else – our plate is full.

In Alma 4, Alma finds himself in this position. He is serving as both the leader of the church and the chief judge of the newly formed government. Even as his church leadership, preaching and teaching leads to 3500 people being baptized in one year, he also sees increased pride and sin among the people. Having to spend much of his time hearing cases as chief judge, Alma is frustrated that he doesn't have sufficient time and focus to deal with the problem.

The Lord inspires Alma with the necessary action to be taken. He resigns as chief judge and selects a man named Nephiah to assume that important position. Even though this is a prestigious position – the equivalent of being Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in today's government – Alma knows this is the right thing to do in order to fully focus on leading the church:

“And this he did that he himself might go forth...among the people of Nephi, that he might preach the word of God unto them, to stir them up in remembrance of their duty, and that he might pull down, by the word of God, all the pride and craftiness and all the contentions which were among his people” (Alma 4:19)

Do you feel you're overextended when it comes to good works? If so, prayerfully consider what can be reassigned to someone else – try not to just drop the work if you want it to continue. Also, keep in mind that your motivation shouldn't be to do less but rather to create extra capacity in your life to do more in the other works you are involved in or even to take on other new works. In other words, don't remove fruit to make room for more twigs and leaves.

Whether it's eliminating the twigs and leaves or removing excess fruit from the tree of our life, let's do whatever pruning is necessary to position ourselves for increased fruitfulness and growth in our service to God.



## Can You Sing It? (Alma 5)

Let's all sing it together:

***"What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought since Jesus came into my heart..."***

It's easy to sing but is it a true statement? It doesn't say that a wonderful change has occurred in someone's life; it says that a wonderful change has occurred in **my** life. So, can I truthfully sing that a wonderful change has occurred in **my** life since Jesus came into **my** heart? Or am I just singing along for the sake of the melody?

*"I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God?...Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?" (Alma 5:14)*

Most of Alma 5 consists of questions like the above that allow for self-examination regarding our relationship with God. As you read each of the questions in the chapter, ask yourself if you can truthfully say those things about yourself. Or, if the words are written on the page of a hymn book, can you sing it?

- Can you "hear the voice of the Lord, saying unto you, in that day: Come unto me ye blessed, for behold, your works have been the works of righteousness" (verse 16)? If so, you can sing, "He held His arms and I ran in...and what I was, I'll never be again".
- Do you recognize that Jesus has rescued you from a future day when you would have to stand before God "with your souls filled with guilt and remorse, having a remembrance of all your guilt, yea, a perfect remembrance of all your wickedness" (verse 18)? If so, you can sing, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me".
- Rather than having "yielded yourselves to become subjects to the devil" (verse 20), have you yielded yourself to the Lord? If so, you can sing, "All to Jesus I surrender, all to Him I freely give".

One of the most memorable questions in this memorable chapter is found in verse 26:

***"If ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?"***

That's right, Alma is asking, "Can You Sing It?". What is the song of redeeming love? It's any song (or really any action in our life) that indicates that we recognize that Jesus loved us enough to hang on the cross and redeem us from our sins, purchasing our place in the kingdom of God.

There are many hymns that can qualify as a "song of redeeming love". One of my favorites is "It Is Well With My Soul". Here's one of the verses – can you sing it?

My sin – oh, the bliss of this glorious thought  
My sin – not in part, but the whole  
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

As you sing the various hymns, pay attention to the words. If the words "I", "me" or "my" are in the hymn, make sure you are singing true statements about yourself. If you find that the statements are not accurate, don't stop singing – rather, make the necessary changes in your life so the statements are accurate.

Jesus died for all mankind so the song of redeeming love is available to everyone. If you are in the Lord's family, the song is about you. Can you sing it?



## Gather Together Oft (Alma 6)

In Alma 6, Alma establishes some order to the church in the capital city of Zarahemla – ordaining ministers and getting the membership roles in order. As the overall leader of the church, he recognizes that he will need to travel around and provide support to the churches in the various Nephite cities so he wants to make sure the church is able to function in Zarahemla in his absence. Among the instructions he gives to the church members:

*“The children of God were commanded that they should gather themselves together oft, and join in fasting and mighty prayer in behalf of the welfare of the souls of those who knew not God” (Alma 6:6)*

Perhaps it seems basic that Alma would tell the church members to have church meetings. However, there was a stated purpose for these gatherings – to fast and pray for souls who didn’t know God. Since the children of God at that time had a desire for all to come to a knowledge of the Lord, this stated purpose gave them incentive to gather together oft.

In a similar manner, we the children of God today will have incentive to attend our church meetings if we understand the purpose of gathering together.

First of all, let’s understand that the purpose of attending a church meeting is not:

- To earn some type of reward from God in the coming week (or avoid a punishment)
- To prevent people from talking about us because we’re not there
- To show off our new clothing outfit

What is the purpose of attending a church meeting? Any from this list can qualify:

- To hear the Word of God preached
- To hear testimonies of God’s goodness
- To sing hymns
- To be prayed for when sick
- To partake of the Lord’s Supper
- To feel close to God

These are all worthwhile purposes and can surely be accomplished by attending church meetings. However, is attending church the only way to accomplish these purposes? With sermons and testimonies posted on-line, we can easily experience those without leaving home. We can sing along with recorded music at home or in the car. If we're sick, ministers are willing to come to our home and pray for us, perhaps even bringing the Lord's Supper. God is everywhere so we can feel close to God wherever we are. So, is it any wonder that people often say, "I don't need to go to church; I can serve God at home"?

The thing to keep in mind regarding the purposes listed above – as worthwhile as they are – is that they all have one thing in common – they're all about me and my personal relationship with God. Although there may be some people in church I can learn from or who I enjoy spending time with there, I may view gathering together with other church members as more of a luxury than a necessity when it comes to serving God.

In order to appreciate the value – the necessity, the criticality – of gathering together as often as possible, we need to adopt the philosophy of serving God by serving others. By thinking this way, I can realize that if I'm not at church, I can't:

- Show my love to the family of God by exchanging hugs, smiles, kind words, etc.
- Let others know about God's goodness in my life by giving my testimony
- Share the knowledge I've been blessed with by preaching, teaching or participating in a Sunday School discussion
- Share advice or comfort to those who need it
- Help new people to feel welcome
- Add my voice to the congregational singing
- Add my prayer to a fasting and prayer initiative
- Allow God to work through me to be a blessing to others

Whenever thinking about whether to attend church, consider who in the congregation will miss out on any of the above if you are not there. Think about a new person attending and deciding not to return when you could have made a difference for that person. Think about someone missing out on the blessing you could have provided.

God has called you into the church not only to save your soul but also to be used as an instrument to help build the kingdom of God. Gather together oft with the people of God and allow Him to use you as He desires.



## What Brings Joy to a Minister (Alma 7)

Now free of the chief judge position and able to focus wholly on leading the church, Alma decides to travel around to check on the status of the church in the various Nephite cities and encourage the church members in each location. His first stop is the city of Gideon – an excerpt of his words to the members in that city is recorded in Alma 7.

Although the bulk of Alma's address concerns the coming of Jesus Christ, he also makes three separate statements about situations that have brought him joy as the church leader:

- The people of Zarahemla (his home city), after having fallen into sinful ways, have repented and become established again in the way of righteousness (verse 4)
- The people of Gideon have a strong faith in Jesus Christ and they believe in what the Church is teaching (verse 17)
- The people he is speaking to have given him their full attention and have absorbed the message that he has delivered (verse 26)

The same three situations can bring joy to a minister today.

### Repentance

Jesus said, "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (Luke 15:10). Likewise, there is joy among the ministry. The most basic calling of a minister of God is to preach repentance and when someone heeds that message, it is a cause of great joy. This can include any of the following scenarios:

- A sinner repents, decides to give his life to the Lord and requests baptism
- A church member who has fallen into a sinful condition repents and rededicates himself to the service of God
- Two people who are at odds with each other are restored to full fellowship with each other as sincere apologies are offered and full forgiveness is extended

Any of the above brings tears to my eyes!



## **Belief**

Pick any belief of the Church and you can find people who are vehemently opposed to it. This can include the deity of Jesus Christ, the validity of the Book of Mormon, the necessity of the various ordinances such as baptism and feet washing or anything that the Church believes in.

If you look at the social media page of someone who doesn't believe in God, you shouldn't be surprised if you see negative comments about things we believe in. If you look at the website of another faith, you would expect to see beliefs that differ from those of our church.

However, what hurts as a minister is to have members of our own church disagree with our beliefs. Whether it's interpretations of the scriptures or positions on current cultural or political issues – whether it's expressed verbally, on social media or by choices made in their personal lives – when our church members do not share the beliefs of the church, it makes it very challenging for the church to move forward and very discouraging for the ministry trying to lead the church.

Conversely, what joy it brings to the ministry when the congregation is united in the beliefs of the church. It makes it easier to preach to the members, it makes it easier to pray together and it makes it easier for new members to learn the beliefs of the church and grow spiritually. This is the condition we love our church to be in!

## **Attention**

With seemingly everyone's attention tied to their electronic devices today, any time that anyone gives you their full attention, you should feel honored. A similar challenge exists for the ministry in trying to present the Word of God – a great deal of competition exists for people's attention.

When preaching a sermon, it's very discouraging for the minister to see people looking at their phones instead of paying attention. On the other hand, if the people in the congregation are making eye contact, occasionally nodding their heads and maybe even saying "Amen" here or there, that is very inspiring for the preacher who will likely rise to even greater heights in delivering the message for the day.

Even as I write these blog articles, I know that I am competing for the attention of our readers with other reading material or TV shows or whatever. As a result, it does make me happy to hear people say they read the articles. It's certainly a better feeling than hearing someone say, "What blog?".

Although the goal of serving God is not to just make your minister happy, the things described above will help the church be successful in its mission today and that should bring joy to all of us.



## Come to My House (Alma 8)

Alma continues his evangelistic travels in Alma 8, eventually arriving at the city of Ammonihah. To put it mildly, he is not well received by the people of this city – they “reviled him, and spit upon him, and caused that he should be cast out of their city” (verse 13). However, as Alma is on the road to the next city, an angel appears to him and instructs him to return to Ammonihah to be used to preach repentance and offer the people the opportunity to avoid destruction.

By the time Alma arrives at the city, he is quite hungry so he asks a man if he can help him out with something to eat. This is not a chance meeting – the man’s name is Amulek and an angel has instructed him in a vision to be prepared to receive a man of God. As a result, Amulek says to Alma, “Go with me into my house and I will impart unto thee of my food; and I know that thou wilt be a blessing unto me and my house” (Alma 8:20).

Have you ever invited the people of God to your home? If not, you’re missing out on a blessing. Although we can enjoy each other’s company at worship services and other church activities, we get to know each other best by spending time in each other’s homes. Instead of being just faces in a congregation, our brothers and sisters become real people with their own endearing qualities as well as their own challenges that we may have never been aware of had we not spent this type of time together.

Over the years, I’ve been blessed with the opportunity to visit the homes of many brothers and sisters throughout the world and we’ve had many brothers and sisters visit our home as well. Lasting memories have been created as we have had the opportunity to:

- Share blessings and experiences from our years of serving God
- Laugh about funny things that have happened to us
- Learn things about each other that we never knew
- Learn things about the church that we may not have known
- Share prayer needs not typically shared in public church meetings
- Pray for each other

Perhaps you're thinking – OK, this sounds great but how do I get started? Especially if you're new to the church, you may not feel comfortable just walking up to someone and saying, "Come to my house".

A good place to start is to invite someone from your congregation to come over for dinner after a Sunday service. This used to be done frequently in the past – especially when people visited different branches of the church – but unfortunately it doesn't happen as often anymore. Perhaps you can help revive this practice somewhat.

Opportunities for overnight guests generally exist when people travel to your area for a church function. Although some may prefer to stay at a hotel, there are many who will appreciate the opportunity to stay at your home. Being able to sit up late at night swapping stories with the brothers and sisters is always a memorable experience.

Admittedly, there is some work involved in preparing your home for a visit. Food needs to be purchased and prepared. Bathrooms may need to be cleaned. Clean sheets may need to be put on beds if the visit is to be overnight. However, try not to let the work involved discourage you from having your home prepared to receive visitors. As much as possible, try to be prepared at all times so there is no barrier when the opportunity arises.

In the Alma and Amulek story referenced above, Alma stayed at Amulek's house for many days and we can just imagine the things that Alma shared with Amulek. Amulek's life was forever changed – he became a co-worker with Alma and received equivalent power from God as he worked for the Lord. It all started when he said to Alma, "Come to my house". Try saying the same to people of God today and see how your life is changed.



## You Should Know Better (Alma 9)

If you were the older sibling growing up (as I was), you may have experienced occasions when you and your younger sibling(s) did something that got you in trouble with your parents. In spite of all of you participating in the same escapade, you as the oldest would get in the most trouble. In justification of this unfair treatment, your parents would say, “You’re older – you should know better”.

Perhaps the Nephites in Ammonihah were feeling like the older sibling in Alma 9 as Alma, while urging them to repentance for their wicked ways, reinforces the point by telling them, “it shall be more tolerable for [the Lamanites] in the day of judgment than for you, if ye remain in your sins, yea, and even more tolerable for them in this life than for you, except ye repent” (Alma 9:15).

If you’re a Nephite hearing the above, you’re probably thinking, “Wait a minute, why should the Lamanites get away with a lesser punishment if we’re all doing basically the same things?”. Alma gives you the answer: “for it is because of the traditions of their fathers that caused them to remain in their state of ignorance; therefore the Lord will be merciful unto them” (Alma 9:16). In other words, you should know better.

Alma further points out that the Nephites have:

- Received significant knowledge of the things of God – “that which has been, and which is, and which is to come” (verse 20)
- Witnessed many manifestations and spiritual gifts of God – visitation of angels, revelation, prophecy, tongues, etc. (verse 21)
- Experienced many answered prayers and miracles – healings, preservation from harm, natural prosperity, etc. (verse 22)

Yes, they definitely should know better!

How about us as servants of God today?

- We have received significant knowledge of the things of God through the Word of God that is available to all of us

- We have witnessed many manifestations and spiritual gifts of God in our various church gatherings – God has even used some of us to bring these forward
- We have experienced many answered prayers and miracles – our testimonies confirm this

After experiencing all of the above, if we find ourselves not serving God at any point in our lives, can we claim ignorance? No, we should know better.

It is our understanding that people who are truly ignorant of God's expectations will not be held accountable for knowledge they don't possess. We don't know exactly how that will work and it's not really our concern how God judges those people. Even though we would have liked to have told our parents how to punish our younger siblings when they misbehaved, it was ultimately up to our parents to decide what was appropriate based on the knowledge level of their younger children.

Just as the older siblings in a family are held to a higher standard, likewise we are held to a higher standard as servants of God. We need to do our best to live up to this. We have been called by God, blessed by God and taught by God so we are in a very privileged position – if we don't serve the Lord who can be expected to? As the child who has experienced more and has been taught more, you can't use ignorance as an excuse – you should know better.



## Cross-Examination (Alma 10)

You're walking down the street and you see a man bump into a woman, knocking her down, and then steal her purse and run away. The man is eventually caught and is on trial for the crime. You are called as a witness and relate what you saw. Now, the defense attorney is going to cross-examine you. The dialogue might go something like this:

Attorney: Are you sure it was my client who you saw that day?

You: Yes, I'm sure

Attorney: Do you remember what the weather was like that day?

You: Well, I don't really remember

Attorney: Oh, you remember seeing my client but you don't even remember if it was sunny or overcast?

You: Um, I think the sun was out

Attorney: Well, according to the National Weather Bureau, the sun did not appear at all that day

You: Oh, I guess I was mistaken

Attorney: Were you also mistaken about who you saw that day?

You: No, no, I remember that clearly

Attorney: I see. And what about...

By skillfully crafting additional questions, nodding his head knowingly at the proper times and shaking his head sadly at others, the lawyer manages to eventually make you look like you don't really know what you're talking about and your whole testimony becomes suspect. If something like this has ever happened to you, don't feel too badly – lawyers are skilled at this type of questioning. Don't hold it against them – it's their job to do this to you and the better ones do it very well.

In Alma 10, Alma and Amulek encounter some lawyers who begin to cross-examine them after giving their testimony of God – “There were some among them who thought to question them, that by their cunning devices they might catch them in their words...these lawyers were learned in all the arts and cunning of the people; and this was to enable them that they might be skillful in their profession” (Alma 10:13,15).

If you are one who gives your testimony of Christ to others, you have probably encountered people like this – not necessarily lawyers but people who are skilled in asking questions in a way that can sometimes trip you up and maybe even embarrass you as you try to present your faith.

The most unfortunate outcome of an experience like this is not that the person who you're speaking to is not convinced – they probably weren't open to it anyway – but rather that you become reluctant to give your testimony the next time. Nobody likes to be embarrassed so it becomes more comfortable to just not discuss your faith rather than taking the risk of being skillfully cross-examined.

Just as in court, the best way to avoid being embarrassed by cross-examination is to focus on relating what you have personally witnessed or experienced. Stick to the facts and you won't get confused.

For example, we recently had the experience of praying for a girl who was brain dead and she then woke up. There were people who wanted to attribute this miracle to something else such as doctor error or whatever. I simply reiterated the basic facts of the case – she was brain dead, we prayed, she woke up. Well, what about this other possibility? Brain dead, prayed, woke up. Yeah, but what about...? Brain dead, prayed, woke up. Repeat as often as necessary.

Remember that in court, there are many times when the defense attorney knows his client is actually guilty. Still, his job is to discredit the witnesses and try to win the case. Likewise, some people who cross-examine your faith may actually know deep down – or at least suspect – that what you are saying is true – regardless, it's their "job" (as they act as an agent of the enemy) to discredit your testimony.

Don't allow yourself to be discouraged by people who are skillful with words. Stick to your testimony and stick to your faith. Allow the Holy Ghost within you to speak for you – as Amulek does in the next chapter – and you will be able to withstand any cross-examination.



## How God Uses Money (Alma 11)

Alma 11 is the chapter in which we learn how much each unit of Nephite money is worth, relative to other units of their money. For example, if you were living in Zarahemla at the time, you would want to know that a senum of silver is equivalent in value to a senine of gold and that either can be used to purchase a measure of barley or any other type of grain. A seon of gold is worth two senines and a shum is worth twice as much as that, and so on.

Although on the surface, U.S. money is easier to understand than Nephite currency – a \$10 bill is worth twice as much as a \$5 bill, a \$20 bill is worth twice as much as that, etc. – we can easily find ourselves having to do mathematical exercises with currency values when we visit other countries. For example, when I visit Central America, I keep in mind that \$1 in U.S. currency is worth \$2.60 in Dominica, 8 quetzals in Guatemala and 20 pesos in Mexico.

Doing these monetary calculations helps me to determine whether the price on a particular item is a good price or if I'm being ripped off. For example, gas in Dominica is about \$21 E.C. per gallon – even after converting to U.S. money, it's still \$8 per gallon – yikes! On the other hand, a small loaf of bread can be purchased for \$1 E.C. which is only 40 cents in U.S. money – pretty good. In Mexico, I was able to buy a bottle of water for 20 pesos which is only about \$1 – definitely cheaper than buying a single bottle of water in the U.S. So, it's not about how much money I have in my pocket but more about what that money can be used for.

God asks us to give Him money – we might well ask ourselves, what does He use it for? After all, if I'm out of gas somewhere, He can just say the word and I'm on my way. If I ask for bread, He's not giving me a stone. If water is in short supply, He can make it rain. There's nobody there with their hand out, telling God He needs to fork over some cash for these things. So, exactly how does God use money?

It's important to understand that God uses money to grow our relationship with Him, such that we learn to trust in Him for all things. It's not really about the money, it's about the decision to give or not give. When we give money to the Lord, we are telling Him that we trust Him to provide for us. When we hold back, we are telling Him that we don't trust Him to provide for us, that we need to take matters into our own hands and provide for ourselves. Which position is more likely to build a strong relationship with God?



With all due respect to the financial needs of the Church, our primary motivation in giving should not be to help the Church pay its bills. We should give because God wants us to build a trusting relationship with Him – it's a spiritual responsibility more than a secular obligation. Yes, the Church will use the money that is received to pay the electric bill, send out missionaries and help the poor but we are giving to God, not to the electric company or the airlines or the grocery store.

I want to stress that by giving to God, you are not trying to buy His favor – you are learning to trust Him. There are numerous experiences of people who trust in God in this way being blessed with just the right amount of money being provided seemingly out of nowhere at just the time it is needed most. Again, it's not about the money, it's about the trust.

*Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. (Malachi 3:10)*

This is how God uses money – as an investment in His relationship with you. Definitely a worthwhile investment, if you ask me.



## Lying to God (Alma 12)

In Alma 12, Alma calls out the lawyer Zeezrom for having lied to the Nephite people in Ammonihah. He goes on to say, “Thou hast not lied to men only but thou hast lied unto God; for behold, he knows all thy thoughts, and thou seest that thy thoughts are made know unto us by his Spirit” (Alma 12:3). Zeezrom is totally flustered that Alma and Amulek seem to know his thoughts and the tone of the conversation changes, giving Alma the opportunity to speak about the mysteries of God and the plan of redemption.

In the above passage, Alma tells Zeezrom he lied to God. Is it actually possible to lie to God? After all, it’s pretty tough to put one over on someone who is everywhere, sees everything you do and even knows your very thoughts.

Think of things that people typically lie about. I wasn’t there. I didn’t do that. I didn’t say that. Maybe we can get away with saying these things to someone who wasn’t there or to someone whose memory can be questioned but can we really convince God that a lie is true?

Even misrepresenting our intentions doesn’t work with God since He knows our thoughts. Yet, how often do we find ourselves trying to convince God that we meant to do the right thing in a certain situation? I didn’t intend for that person to get hurt but they misunderstood what I meant. I was going to go to church today but I got busy, was too tired, didn’t feel that great, etc. It’s all fine and well if the statements are true but if not, are we fooling God?

So, although it is technically possible to lie to God, we can’t do it effectively because He isn’t fooled by lies. And we know that. So why would anyone even try to do it?

The truth is that when we say things to God that are not entirely accurate, whether they be exaggerations, favorable spins, wishful thinking or any other category of mistruth, we’re not trying to convince God – we’re trying to convince ourselves. Admitting to God that we were wrong means we have to admit it to ourselves – not only is that difficult to do at times but it may also require some additional action to be taken, such as repentance, perhaps some type of remediation or apology as well as some type of promise – to God, to ourselves – that we will do better the next time.

Understanding this distinction allows for a clearer understanding of this verse:

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)*

Confessing our sins to God is not for the purpose of informing Him of what we did or didn't do. He already knows full well what happened. The purpose is to admit our sins to ourselves – in God's presence – and then repent of those sins and have a determination to do better going forward. At that point, God is there to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from our unrighteousness such that we are again made perfect in His sight, even as we were at the time of our baptism.

So, if we want to increase our level of righteousness, how shall we handle it? Should we lie to God about how righteous we are? Or should we admit to Him – and therefore to ourselves – where we are and allow Him to help us climb to a higher level of righteousness? Hopefully, the choice is easy.



## Not On My Watch (Alma 13)

“And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea” (Matthew 14:25)

The above verse is part of the famous account of Jesus walking on the water to the ship where His disciples were trying to ride out a storm. Did you ever take note of the first part of the verse that refers to “the fourth watch of the night”? The custom at the time was to divide the night (6 PM through 6 AM) into four periods of three hours each such that the members of the crew would take turns being responsible for the ship while the others slept.

Imagine if you were the one responsible for the entire ship for that period of time. If anything bad happens to the ship, it can be seen as your fault – even if it’s something out of your control – because it happened on your watch. Even if a bad situation is inevitable, you’ll want to try the best you can to make sure it’s not on your watch.

In Alma 13, Alma describes the priesthood of Jesus Christ – also known as “the priesthood after the order of the Son of God” – as something that has been in existence from the very beginning of time and always will be:

“This high priesthood being after the order of his Son, which order was from the foundation of the world; or in other words, being without beginning of days or end of years, being prepared from eternity to all eternity, according to his foreknowledge of all things” (Alma 13:7)

That’s right – the priesthood after the order of the Son of God existed even before Jesus came to earth! To illustrate this, Alma gives the example of Melchizedek, the king of Salem at the time of Abraham – a member of this same priesthood who even distributed bread and wine (see Genesis 14:18). Whereas we use the bread and wine today to remember what Jesus did 2000 years ago, the same ordinance (as Alma explains in verse 16) was used prior to Christ to encourage the people to look forward to His coming.

Since the priesthood is ongoing throughout time, those who have been called into this holy order during this period of time are basically taking a turn being “on watch”. Many others had their turn being on watch in years past. Many others will have a turn being on watch in the future. However, as expressed in a 2005 General Church Conference address by the President of The Church of Jesus Christ – This is our time!

At one time it was Melchizedek. At one time it was Peter. At one time it was Alma. At one time it was the church leaders of the previous century. Now it's us. Are we up to the task of being responsible for the Church as the priesthood after the order of the Son of God?

Fairly or not, history will judge us not necessarily by what we accomplish as individuals but rather by what happens to the Church during our watch. Regardless of the challenges of the day, this is our time to lead the Church. Will we allow the Church to sink into irrelevance during our lifetime? I hope we can all answer with a resounding, "Not on my watch!".



## When Your Work is Not Yet Finished (Alma 14)

In Alma 14, Alma and Amulek endure a horrible ordeal, witnessing the martyrdom of women and children who are burned to death in front of them. As this awful scene unfolds before them, they can only take solace in the knowledge that these martyred souls are on their way to the paradise of God. They also have a brief conversation about their own fate:

“Now Amulek said unto Alma: Behold, perhaps they will burn us also. And Alma said: Be it according to the will of the Lord. But, behold, our work is not finished; therefore they burn us not.” (Alma 14:12-13)

We can admire the bold faith of Alma as he expresses his confidence that God will preserve their lives because their work on earth is not yet finished. And, sure enough, not only are Alma and Amulek not burned to death with the others but they are later miraculously delivered from prison such that they are able to continue their mission for the Lord.

For each of us today, whatever amount of “work” we are to accomplish on this earth obviously must be completed before we depart from this life. Even Jesus was under the same constraint as He stated, “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work” (John 9:4).

In one of the office buildings I used to work in, there was a sign on someone’s desk that read, “God put me on this earth to accomplish a certain number of things. Right now, I am so far behind that I will never die.”

Clearly, this quote is really just intended to bring a smile as we all seem to have endless “to-do” lists. Our personal inefficiencies obviously do not trigger a lengthening of our lives on earth. Rather, if we believe that God intends for us to accomplish a certain number of things in our lives, let’s get busy and accomplish those things while we yet have life (and health and strength).

On the other hand, there are occasions – however rare – when someone’s life is seemingly about to end and, miraculously, that person’s life is extended. It’s at times like those that we may observe that the person’s work on earth is not yet finished.

I experienced this myself in 2009 when I developed pulmonary embolisms (blood clots that went into my lungs) after surgery which got progressively worse until I finally stopped breathing. My

wife who witnessed this said she was sure that I was gone at that moment. However, as a result of a quickly assembled prayer network (text messaging can serve a good purpose) and an anointing in the hospital, I revived and fully recovered. When I returned to church the next Sunday and testified of my experience, I remarked, “It appears my work is not yet finished”. Since that time, I have done my best to make the most of the extended period of time that God has given me.

If you ever experience an occasion where God spares your life, don’t minimize it as just an indication that God loves you. After all, He also loves the people whose lives are tragically cut short. Rather, try to understand why God intervened in that particular way at that particular time. It may well be that your work on earth is not yet finished – if so, make sure you do whatever it is that God kept you here to do. The next time around, your date may not be moved so do the work while it is “day” – sooner or later, “the night cometh, when no man can work”.



## Lay Down the Weight (Alma 15)

Many of us carry around some extra weight on our bodies. Some people even tell me I'm carrying a little extra weight (the people who are kind say it that way). Wouldn't it be nice if we could take that weight – that burden – and lay it aside and go on without it? Imagine how much better we would feel and how much more we could do.

Now, suppose there was someone who could just speak the words to make the weight depart. No dieting, no exercise, no surgery necessary. How popular would that person be? Wouldn't you recommend him to all your friends?

In Alma 15, the lawyer Zeezrom is dealing with a very heavy weight. In his case, the weight is the guilt associated with the consequences of some of his recent actions. The guilt of his sin has actually made him physically ill:

"Zeezrom lay sick at Sidom, with a burning fever, which was caused by the great tribulations of his mind on account of his wickedness, for he supposed that Alma and Amulek...had been slain because of his iniquity. And this great sin, and his many other sins, did harrow up his mind...therefore he began to be scorched with a burning heat." (Alma 15:3)

Zeezrom takes courage when he learns that Alma and Amulek are actually still alive. Alma then leads him to repentance for his sins which causes a great weight to be removed from Zeezrom – he leaps from his bed and is subsequently baptized. His life is forever changed as he goes about preaching the gospel, telling people how the Lord is able to remove the great weight of sin from their lives.

Perhaps it's been many years since you laid down your weight of guilt and sin and gave your life to the Lord. Do you remember how it felt? Do you remember how easy it was? You just needed to repent of your sins and be baptized and the Lord did the rest – He did all the heavy lifting of removing the weight from you. Can we still praise the Lord for that day?

Perhaps we still occasionally do things for which we feel guilty. When that happens, it slows us down spiritually and robs us of some of the joy we felt when we gave our lives to the Lord. If we are repentant of whatever we did wrong, we don't need to carry around the weight of guilt for it – we can give that to the Lord also. If He was capable of removing all of our guilt on the day of our baptism, He can certainly do the same for us now.



And, now that we have gone through this “weight loss program” and have experienced the good results, can we recommend it to others? Regardless of the weight of someone’s sin or guilt, the Lord is able to forgive and change the person’s life. He did it for us; He can do it for them. No dieting, no exercise, no surgery necessary – just lay down the weight at the foot of the cross.

**“Lay Down the Weight, Son” from the Songs of Zion**

My son, do you carry a thing that’s called sin?  
And is your load heavy, has Satan come in?  
Well, Christ took your load back when He walked the hill.  
He took it then, son, and He takes it still.

Lay down the weight, son, lay down the weight.  
Daughter, ahead stands the bright shining gate.  
Lay all aside if you would enter in.  
Lay down your burden of sin.



## When God is in the Matter (Alma 16)

In Alma 16, there is a cry of war throughout the land. The Lamanites attack the city of Ammonihah, killing many of the Nephites and carrying others captive into the wilderness. The Nephite army is desirous to rescue their fellow Nephites but they don't know whether it's feasible – they don't know which way the Lamanites have gone in the wilderness so they may not be able to catch up to them or even find them. The leaders of the army wisely decide to seek the Lord's direction:

“Knowing that Alma...had the spirit of prophecy, therefore they went unto him and desired of him to know whether the Lord would that they should go into the wilderness in search of their brethren, who had been taken captive by the Lamanites. And it came to pass that Alma inquired of the Lord concerning the matter.” (Alma 16:5-6)

God then revealed to Alma the exact route that the Lamanites were taking and provided a plan for the Nephite army such that they were able to intercept the Lamanites and rescue the Nephites who had been kidnapped. Quite an advantage when God is in the matter!

Does God still work the same way today? Yes, He does. But, we need to make sure that we are doing what God wants us to do rather than assuming He will automatically be in the matter just because it's something we want to do.

Notice the first question that the Nephite army asked Alma to approach God with – do you want us to go after the Lamanites in the wilderness? Perhaps it might have seemed obvious to some – of course God wants us to rescue the people. However, perhaps God had some other plan or perhaps there was some reason why these kidnapped Nephites needed to be going to the Lamanite city.

Regardless, it would have been pretty presumptuous for the Nephite army to just jump into their own plan and then expect God to be in the matter. If they were then unsuccessful, would they have complained that God let them down? Would they have lost their faith? All because God didn't help them with something He didn't want them to do in the first place?

The parallel to our own life is clear. If we are considering embarking on any type of venture, whether in our personal lives or in working for God, we need to consult with Him first to see if it

is His will that we move forward. If it is His will, we can then seek His further guidance as to how the venture can be accomplished.

How do we know when God is in the matter? Does silence from God constitute His support? Not really. An apparent non-response can mean any number of things. It can be a “No”. It can mean that the timing isn’t right so wait and keep praying about it. It can even mean that no answer is necessary because the Lord has already provided guidance previously, either through a direct response or through the Word of God.

The only way we can really know that God is in the matter is when something happens to let us know that He is. The “something” can also vary. Perhaps we try something and get good results – that can be an indicator that God is in the matter. Perhaps God will communicate His assent through an experience or in whatever way you normally hear His voice.

I would, however, express caution about taking an unclear experience or thought and running with it. Think back over your past history of receiving “direction” in this way and see how it turned out. God doesn’t make mistakes so if we receive bad results from following what we think is God’s direction, it’s possible that we may not be hearing Him correctly. For example, if the Nephite army didn’t find the Lamanites in the place where God told them to go, it would have meant that Alma got the message wrong – but of course he got it right since the Lamanites were exactly where God told Alma they would be.

When God is in the matter, we need not fear. We can move forward with confidence, knowing that the will of God will be accomplished and we will be blessed by participating in God’s plan.



## The Value of Attending Gatherings (Alma 17)

In Alma 17, Alma continues his travels between the cities of the Nephites to check on the spiritual health of each. As he is on the road to the land of Manti, he is surprised to have a chance encounter with four old friends – the four sons of Mosiah. Even though they are just passing each other on the road, this a joyful reunion as they haven't seen each other in fourteen years. What makes it so joyful?

- **They have a shared history with each other.** Years earlier, an angel appeared to them when they were all together and they all gave their lives to the Lord at that time. Perhaps they recalled that shared experience during this reunion.
- **It's a blessing to see that they are all still brothers in Christ.** Some people start out serving the Lord and then fall away so this is not something to take for granted.
- **They are able to share experiences with each other.** The experiences shared by the sons of Mosiah are so powerful that Alma uses the next several chapters (all the way through Alma 28) to share them with us.

We have the opportunity today to participate in reunions similar to the one described above. And, we don't have to wait for a chance encounter on the road to do this. The Church schedules gatherings, referred to as Conferences and Campouts, at which we can build and maintain friendships throughout our lifetimes.

Oh, OK, I get it now – this is just another “come to Conference” thing, right? Conference is next week, isn't it? Well, I can just read the minutes to find out what happened. There's going to be a video recording of the Sunday meeting, isn't there? I'll just watch that.

Well, by all means, if we are unable to attend a particular gathering, we should read the minutes/articles/reports to know what happened and watch whatever videos are made available to share in the blessings. With today's technology, these are typically available very soon after the actual event so it almost feels like we were there.

However, it's of course not the same as being there. Many personal interactions – both us with others and others with us – are missed out on when we are not physically in attendance at the gatherings. Granted there is effort and expense involved, especially for those who live far away.

But when we are able to attend, we can then experience the same things that were experienced by Alma and the four sons of Mosiah in their reunion:

**Recalling Shared History** – One brother who I will likely see at the next Conference may remind me of the time I spilled an entire bowl of wonton soup in my lap when we were together on a missionary trip. Another will recall the time that he and I were mistaken for the police when we approached a couple of vagrant guys in a Detroit alley to tell them about the Lord. Another may fondly remember the time that he and I spoke to some prisoners in a New Mexico jail and then prayed for the men by reaching through the bars and placing our hands on each head. What memories do you share with specific brothers or sisters?

**Still Brothers and Sisters in Christ** – When you don't see someone in a long time, you do tend to wonder whether the person is still in the Church. Even just a warm greeting with someone is enough for each of you to know that you're still brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Sharing Experiences** – There are always new stories to relate – experiences, miracles, answered prayers, prayer needs, church accomplishments, etc. Some of these may be written up as blogs or blessing bits but many will not. Each story that we tell or hear helps build our collective faith and gives us increased determination to continue to move forward with the building up of the kingdom of God.

Hopefully, we can all agree that there is value in attending the gatherings of the Church. Even as the world moves away from physical interaction in favor of virtual interaction, let's not allow ourselves to mistakenly think that one is just as good as the other. Let's try to be there as often as we can.

Looking forward to sharing greetings, memories and experiences with you at a future gathering!



## Power of God Provides Credibility (Alma 18)

Alma 18 continues the story of the missionary effort of Ammon (one of the four sons of Mosiah) among a group of Lamanites under the rule of a king named Lamoni. In the previous chapter, Ammon had singlehandedly defeated a group of men who were attacking the flocks of Lamoni – in a memorable episode, Ammon cut off the arms of the attackers, thereby preserving the king’s flocks and saving the lives of his fellow servants who would have otherwise been executed for failing in their duty to the king.

When King Lamoni hears this amazing story, he calls for Ammon but doesn’t even know what to say to him. Being filled with the Spirit of God, Ammon states the exact thoughts of the king regarding this meeting and Lamoni is even more amazed.

Ammon is given the opportunity to speak plainly to the king and he proceeds to describe who God is and that it is through the power of God that he has been able to do what he has done. Ammon goes on to relate the plan of redemption, including the coming of Christ, and the king believes all of his words. The chapter ends with King Lamoni being overcome with the Spirit and falling to the earth as if dead, remaining in that condition for two full days.

Why was the Lamanite king willing to listen to Ammon? Was it because Ammon was famous (he wasn’t) or because he was highly educated (not likely) or because he was saying things that validated the king’s behavior (obviously not)? On the contrary, Ammon was from the hated race of the Nephites, he was serving as a simple servant and he was telling the king he had to repent of his sins. Yet, the king listened and believed. Why? Because the power of God clearly accompanied Ammon, giving his message credibility.

The Church of Jesus Christ has a message for the world today but we face severe challenges. Famous people say our message is wrong. People who are viewed as being highly educated do not agree with our message. There are even parts of our message – a restored gospel, the Book of Mormon – that other Christian faiths do not agree with. And, of course, our message does not validate the behavior of many people – rather, it calls upon them to repent of their sins and live their lives according to the Word of God.

So, how can we convince people of our message – or even get them to listen? Only by being able to demonstrate that the power of God is with us.

Read the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. Elijah stood alone against 450 prophets of a different faith. Two altars were built and the prophets of Baal prayed all day long for their god to burn the sacrifice but nothing happened. Elijah then offered one prayer and fire came down from heaven, consuming both altars in a spectacular display of the power of God. No further discussion was necessary – it was clear whose position was the correct one.

OK, so the power of God provides credibility. How do we get it (or more of it, since we do see it from time to time)? Pray. Fast and pray. Ask for it by name. Tell the Lord you desire to see more of the power of God associated with our prayer requests – in our church meetings and in all aspects of our lives. Ask him to provide it such that it will be a convincing power to the world. This is a daily prayer of mine – can it be yours? The more of us who bring this before the Lord, the more we will move the arm of God.

As time goes by, we will come more and more under fire for our message – we'll hear that it's not politically correct, it's intolerant, it's out of touch with contemporary values, etc. It will be great if the same people saying this then have to admit, "Yes, but look what happens when they pray". No further discussion necessary.



## Seizing the Opportunity (Alma 19)

### **Opportunity – A set of circumstances that makes it possible to do something**

Alma 19 is an exciting part of the story of Ammon's missionary effort among the Lamanites. In this chapter, the Lamanite king and queen are overcome by the Spirit of God, an angry Lamanite tries to kill Ammon only to be struck dead by God, and many Lamanites are converted and the church is begun in that city.

One of the key participants in this episode is a Lamanite woman named Abish, who had been converted to the Lord many years earlier. She had kept her faith secret until this time, waiting for the opportunity to be used by God. Seeing the king and queen overcome by the Spirit, Abish recognizes that the circumstances exist for her to do something to further the work of the Lord and she seizes the opportunity:

"When she saw that [they] had fallen to the earth...she knew that it was the power of God; and supposing that this opportunity...would cause them (the Lamanite people) to believe in the power of God, therefore she ran forth from house to house, making it known unto the people."  
(Alma 19:17)

As a result of Abish taking action at the time when the opportunity existed, many Lamanite people are able to witness the power of God and they are converted to the Lord that day.

Are you someone who wants to do something for the Lord? If so, are the circumstances right for you to do something right now? Are these circumstances such that they will change in time, making it less possible or even impossible to do the same thing later? Sometimes, the window of opportunity is narrow; other times, it may seem like the circumstances will stay the same for a long time. Regardless, don't delay – seize the opportunity while it exists!

When I was a young evangelist, I had a desire to be involved with foreign mission work and I felt drawn to the island of Dominica as the church was just getting started there. However, the missionary teams were fully staffed at the time so there was no opportunity for me to go. While at October Conference that year, I heard that a minister was planning a trip to Dominica, departing on Thanksgiving Day. Due to the holiday, there was no other minister planning to travel with him.



Could this be my opportunity to go? The timing wasn't ideal – it would mean missing Thanksgiving with my family. However, my very supportive wife encouraged me to seize the opportunity and I made my first foreign mission trip to Dominica, beginning a relationship that has taken me back there about 50 times since.

Some opportunities are one-time opportunities as described above; others may exist for years. However, even lengthy opportunities eventually expire so we still need to seize the opportunity while circumstances permit. For example:

- If you're a young person, take advantage of opportunities to go to Campout or Youth in Action or other youth-related activities. The time will come when you're working full time or raising a family and the same opportunities won't exist.
- If you're a parent, teach your children about the Lord while they're young and bring them to as many church activities as possible. The time will come when they are grown and your influence on them will be greatly diminished.
- If you're a healthy adult, be as active as possible in working for the Lord, whether locally or in other parts of the country or internationally. Don't wait for the "golden years" when the body starts to break down and health may prevent you from being as active as you can be now.

Whether your opportunities to do something for the Lord are many or few, you have to seize an opportunity in order to do anything. If you feel that your opportunities are few, it's then even more important to seize them when they come along. Abish waited many years for an opportunity to use her faith to affect her people for Christ – when it came, she jumped on it. If she let that one pass, she may have never had another opportunity. Let's not let our opportunities to do something for the Lord pass us by.



## Ready to Go (Alma 20)

When you're planning a trip, there is a process involved in getting ready to go. Depending on your individual situation, the process may be involved – perhaps you need to pack a lot of things, perhaps you need to purchase some things, perhaps you need to make arrangements for others to do things for you while you're away, etc. On the other hand, there may be times when the preparations are brief – just grab some things and go.

There are even people who keep an overnight bag packed at all times so they are ready to go at a moment's notice. An example of this would be when a woman is expecting a baby. The time to go to the hospital may come at any time with very little time to react so the wise course of action is to be ready to go at all times.

In Alma 20, Ammon and the newly converted King Lamoni are on their way to the land of Middoni to try to free Ammon's brother Aaron from prison. As they are traveling, they encounter King Lamoni's father, who is the king over all the lands of the Lamanites. This powerful man is very angry at his son, especially when he sees that he is friendly with the Nephite Ammon.

Lamoni's father draws his sword with the intention of killing his son but Ammon steps between them and prevents this from occurring. He then makes a statement that illustrates his faith and shows what it means to be ready to go:

*"But Ammon stood forth and said unto him: Behold, thou shalt not slay thy son; nevertheless, it were better that he should fall than thee, for behold, he has repented of his sins; but if thou shouldst fall at this time, in thine anger, thy soul could not be saved."* (Alma 20:17)

Even as Ammon was stepping in to save his friend, he knew that if someone had to die this day, it would be better from a perspective of eternity for that person to be someone who was ready to go to paradise rather than someone who was not ready and therefore could not go there.

Although perhaps none of us wants to go to paradise today, we all want to go there some day. How ready are we to go?

- Are we the person who has a lot to do before being ready to go on a trip? Perhaps we still need to repent of our sins, give our lives to the Lord, make some changes in our lives, etc. If there is much to do, let's get started right away so we will be ready to go in time.

- Are we the person who knows what has to be done but just hasn't done it yet? Perhaps we're living a good life but just haven't been baptized yet or we haven't let go of the one thing that's holding us back. If we know what has to be done, let's do it today so we are ready to go.
- Or, are we the expectant mother who has made all the preparations and is ready to go whenever the time comes? If so, praise God for this and let's not do any "unpacking" – let's stay ready to go.

In addition to being ready to go ourselves, we of course want our loved ones and as many people as possible to go to paradise as well so let's encourage those we come in contact with to make themselves ready to go too.

We all have a trip planned. The destination is selected – the paradise of God. The exact time is not selected. This is not a trip to be missed out on so let's make sure – today and for as long as we live – that we are ready to go.



## Why Don't I See Angels? (Alma 21)

Alma 21 begins the story of another missionary trip among the Lamanite people. This time, the lead missionary is Aaron, another of the four sons of Mosiah. As the story begins, Aaron is preaching to the people and he shares the testimony of that momentous day in his life when the angel of the Lord appeared to him and his brothers, resulting in their conversion to Christ.

However, not everyone in this particular congregation is especially impressed by this testimony. In fact, one of them gets up and angrily argues with Aaron, saying:

“What is this that thou hast testified? Hast thou seen an angel? Why do not angels appear unto us? Behold are not this people as good as thy people?” (Alma 21:5)

Although the above was an angry reaction by a non-believer, there have been many believers over time – and it continues today – who sometimes struggle with the notion that only a small subset of believers are blessed with certain spiritual gifts, such as the ability to see angels in their midst.

Have you ever thought about this yourself? If so, maybe you've asked yourself some questions similar to the above. Continuing with the example of seeing angels, your questions may have sounded like these:

- **Why don't I see angels?** I have a strong faith in God. I've been a church member my whole life. Am I doing something wrong? Doesn't God love me?
- **Why should that other person see angels?** He's a new member of the church. He doesn't even come to church all the time. He has lots of faults. Why would God choose him to see angels?

Putting all of the above together can lead to disbelief, generally in the form of “if God was going to let anybody see angels, it would be someone like me, not someone like him”.

So, how does God choose who sees the angels? Is it based on number of years in the church? Is it based on an ordained office? Is it based on accomplishments? Is it based on lack of faults? It's none of those. Rather, “the beholding of angels and ministering spirits [are gifts that]...come by

the Spirit of Christ; and they come unto every man severally, according as he will” (Moroni 10:14,17).

Since the beholding of angels is a gift from God (among other spiritual gifts), it is not something that is earned or that is a reward for services rendered. It is purely a gift and God decides who to give it to (according as He will). It is given “severally” (individually or independently) – this means there is no connection or inference to be drawn between who receives the gift and who doesn’t. This knowledge should free us from having to stress about “why him, not me?”, since it’s neither a reward (when given) or a judgment (when not).

Speaking specifically about the ability to see angels, it’s a blessing to a congregation to have someone who can see them, regardless of who actually has the gift. The angels are always there but it provides a spiritual boost to a congregation to have their presence confirmed.

A few years ago, we had a new sister in our branch who routinely saw angels sitting in each of the empty seats in our church building. However, being new, she didn’t know what to make of this so she didn’t tell any of us what she was seeing. After a few weeks, a different sister related in her testimony that she saw angels sitting in each of the empty seats – the new sister jumped up and exclaimed, “I’m so glad you see them too! I thought I was crazy!”. We often refer back to this experience, recognizing that the angels are always in attendance at our church meetings.

So, if someone in your congregation sees angels, don’t delve too deeply into why that person sees them and you don’t. Rather, be thankful for the gift to your congregation and seek to use whatever other gifts God has given you for the edification of the body of Christ.



## Ministering to Your Family (Alma 22)

**Minister (verb) – Attend to the needs of someone, care for, look after, help, assist, serve**

Perhaps it sounds like an obvious statement to say that people should take care of their families. Even as you read this, you may be getting ready to go off to work to earn money for your family. Perhaps you have chores to do today to help your household. Perhaps you have a sick or elderly family member you are caring for.

The vast majority of people assist their family in one way or another. This includes those who are servants of God as well as those who are not. However, although caring for a family is not necessarily tied to serving God, it is something that any servant of God should take seriously – “ministering” to your family is not only the “right thing to do” but it can also have spiritual ramifications.

In Alma 22, Aaron preaches the gospel to the father of King Lamoni, the king over all the Lamanite lands, who was mentioned in an earlier chapter. After hearing the Word of God, this powerful king is so overcome by the Spirit of God that he passes out for a period of time. When he awakens, the king – to the surprise of all who are witnessing this – displays a significant change of heart and goes about serving the members of his household:

“And he did minister unto them, insomuch that his whole household were converted unto the Lord” (Alma 22:23)

This was a king who was accustomed to ordering people around. He obviously was not someone who would personally do things for others, not even his own family. So, when he suddenly begins serving his family members, the change is so evident that it creates within all who witness it a desire to experience the same spirit – one that is powerful enough to change even the hard heart of this king – and all of them are converted to the Lord as a result.

It can work the same way today. Typically, when we’re converted to the Lord, we try to treat others better to demonstrate the change that has occurred within us. Let’s not overlook our family members when we do this. They are the people who know us best – they see us at our worst – so if they see a change in us, they will know it’s real. Perhaps this realization will spark some interest in learning more about the power that has caused this change to occur.

Some years ago, a young sister was baptized in our branch but she was hesitant about telling her mother what she had done since her mother was a lifelong member of another faith. After some time passed, she finally told her mother and her mother's reply was, "Well, I can't say anything bad about this Church because I can see the change in you". The change within us is evidence of the power of the gospel to those who are closest to us.

Many of us will become very involved in the Church and working for the Lord. However, we don't want to ever use our service to God as a reason to neglect our families. My advice to missionaries, ministers and all workers for the Lord is to achieve a balance between the time/effort spent ministering to the world and the time/effort spent ministering to your family. How sad it would be for a marriage to break up or for children to grow up without a relationship with one of their parents solely because that person is consumed by working for the Lord (however worthwhile of an effort that may be).

Ministering to your family is part of your total ministry, part of your service to God. If God has called you to be a spouse, a parent, a caregiver or any other family member, take that calling seriously. You may well be the only member of the Church who has access to your family so allow the Lord to use you for the unique opportunity of ministering to your family.



## A New Name (Alma 23)

Receiving or assuming a new name is typically indicative of some major change in a person's life – a change for which the former name no longer is totally suitable or sufficient to describe the new status that the person has entered.

At the very least, each of us received a new name when we were born. That name replaced the generic term, "the baby", or the default name ("Baby Boy Doe") that would otherwise have been given at the hospital – instead, the name we received identified us as part of a specific family.

When a woman gets married, she typically assumes a new name, changing her last name to the name of her husband. The new name identifies her as part of a new family formed by her and her husband. Although the husband's name does not change, his family (as it expands from one person to two) does receive a new name – changing from "Mr." to "Mr. & Mrs." – so both receive a new name to designate this new status.

In Alma 23, the converted Lamanite king and the other converted Lamanites decide that they need a new name to go along with their new status as followers of Christ – something that will distinguish them from the remainder of the unbelieving Lamanites:

"And now it came to pass that the king and those who were converted were desirous that they might have a name, that thereby they might be distinguished from their brethren...And it came to pass that they called their names Anti-Nephi-Lehies; and they were called by this name and were no more called Lamanites." (Alma 23:16-17)

It's not so much the name they chose that's important but rather that they recognized they were beginning a new life and wanted a new name to go along with that.

When we give our lives to Christ, we also receive a new name – actually two new names.

First and foremost, we each receive the name of Christ – the name that we will carry in our hearts into eternity and which will identify us as part of the group who will be called to be on the right hand of God (the good side) on judgment day. See Mosiah 5:8-12.

In addition, we receive a new name in this life – we are referred to as "Brother" or "Sister" in The Church of Jesus Christ. Some of us – trying to be nice, inclusive, etc. – refer to everyone in the



congregation as Brother or Sister, whether or not they have been baptized. I absolutely do not do this. I feel strongly that we don't do a person any favors by allowing them to think they are in the same status as the baptized members of the Church when they haven't made the commitment yet. You don't get the new name until you start the new life.

As much as all of the above events are causes for celebration as we receive a new name, the reverse – where we give back the new name – is devastating to an equal degree:

- As a parent, how would you feel if your child changed his name, specifically to disassociate himself from your family?
- It always saddens me to see a married couple split up – the man's family name goes from "Mr. & Mrs." back to just "Mr."; the woman often goes back to her maiden name. And the children carry the name of a family that no longer exists. Very sad.
- And, most devastating is when someone who has taken on the name of Christ decides to not carry that name any longer. If the angels rejoice when someone comes to Christ, what do they do when someone walks away? Speaking for myself, I couldn't wait to have "Brother" added to my name. I find it hard to identify with those who choose to have that part removed from their names.

It's a blessing to have a new name as described above so don't allow outside influences to convince you to go back to an old name. If you're blessed to have the new name that makes you part of the kingdom of God – that new name is worth more than anything in this world; it's your ticket to heaven so hang on to it until you enter in!

***There's a new name written down in glory.  
And it's mine, O yes, it's mine!  
With my sins forgiven, I am bound for heaven,  
Nevermore to roam!***



## Burying the Old Man (Alma 24)

***“Put off...the old man, which is corrupt...be renewed in the spirit of your mind...put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24)***

In Alma 24, the converted Lamanites – now known as Anti-Nephi-Lehies – bring the above scripture to life. The king expresses this group’s collective praise to God that “he hath forgiven us of those our many sins and murders which we have committed, and taken away the guilt from our hearts, through the merits of his Son” (verse 10).

The king then expresses fear as to how God might react should they ever go back to their former ways of killing and murdering. Based on this, the entire group comes to a collective decision:

“When the king had made an end of these sayings, and all the people were assembled together, they took their swords, and all the weapons which were used for the shedding of man’s blood, and they did bury them up deep in the earth. And this they did, it being in their view a testimony to God, and also to men, that they never would use weapons again for the shedding of man’s blood” (Alma 24:17-18)

For the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, murder had been their “thing”. They surely had committed many other sins but this was the one that jumped out for them, the one thing that they wanted to make sure they never went back to. So, as a testimony before God that they were done with this sin for good, they literally buried it in the earth, never to be dug up again.

It’s probably safe to say that most of us have not engaged in murder in our lifetimes but we surely haven’t been perfect either. When we gave our lives to the Lord, perhaps there was one type of sin in particular that stuck out above the rest as something we were especially grateful to God to be forgiven of. If so, what steps were taken to “bury” this behavior? Is it still buried today?

How about other behaviors that characterized our “old man”? Are they buried or do they still show up from time to time?

The Holy Ghost, which we received after we were baptized, by the laying on of hands by the ministry, places within us the desire to change our lives to be the servants God wants us to be. If we follow the direction of the Holy Ghost, the old man will stay buried. However, we as humans can easily be tempted and then the old man can resurface. It’s for times like these that identifying

specific steps for ourselves – like the Anti-Nephi-Lehies burying their weapons – can help minimize the temptation to return to past behaviors that God has already forgiven us for.

What would be similar to burying the weapons for us? It could include any of the following:

- Disposing of items which we have used for sinful purposes
- No longer going places where we have engaged in sinful behavior
- Disassociating ourselves from people who have been our “partners in crime”
- Filling our time with activities – whether related to church or helping others or just having fun in a non-sinful way – such that we no longer have time for sinful activities
- Pairing up with an “accountability partner” such that each keeps the other accountable to not go back to the old man behaviors

Burying the old man not only keeps us on the straight and narrow path that leads to God’s kingdom but it also allows us to present our own lives as evidence of what God can do. When the attacking Lamanites saw that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies were willing to die rather than go back to their former behavior of fighting with their swords, the battle stopped and over a thousand of the Lamanites were converted. The people who know you will know your conversion is real if you do your best to bury the old man and live the life of the new man who God has created in righteousness and true holiness.



## The Golden Rule (Alma 25)

Let's begin with a little quiz. Which of the following statements best expresses the concept of what is traditionally referred to as "The Golden Rule"?

- A. Do unto others as they do unto you
- B. Do unto others as you would want others to do unto you
- C. Whatever you do unto others will be done unto you
- D. Whoever has the gold makes the rules

Many people choose how to treat others based on Statement A. If you're nice to me, I'll be nice to you. If you do something bad to me, I'll get you back. However, as followers of Christ, we're expected to do better than this. As Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, "For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same?" (Matthew 5:46). Statement A is clearly not the golden rule.

Statement B is, of course, the traditional golden rule. It is based on another statement of Jesus in the same Sermon on the Mount: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" (Matthew 7:12). Following this concept causes us to treat all people well – after all, which of us would choose to have others treat us badly?

The above is pretty basic Christianity. We all know the golden rule, right? Of course we do. We all live this way, right? Well, maybe most of the time. Well, maybe sometimes. Well, you know, there are those people who make it so difficult. Considering how basic of a concept this is, it actually seems like many people struggle with it.

Although Statement C is not a true statement, let's suppose for a minute that it was. If we knew that whatever we did to someone else would be done to us, would that influence our choices of how to treat others?

The wicked priests of King Noah (back in Mosiah 17) were told by Abinadi, a prophet of God, that Statement C would apply to them – whatever they did to him would be done to them and their descendants. Did they make a good choice? No, they followed through with their evil intentions and put Abinadi to death by fire.

Now, in Alma 25, it's time for the prophecy of God to be fulfilled:

“Thus the words of Abinadi were brought to pass, which he said concerning the seed of the priests who caused that he should suffer death by fire...this is what he meant, that many should suffer death by fire, according as he had suffered” (Alma 25:9,11)

It’s important to understand that the above scenario took place only because it was a prophecy of God and all such prophecies must come to pass. In general, God doesn’t dole out punishments in this life to match what we do to others. Although some may want to question God as to why it doesn’t work this way, He actually wants us to do what’s right simply because it’s what’s right – not to avoid a punishment (or to earn a reward) in this life. The Holy Ghost within us should be inspiring us to treat others properly, using the golden rule as a guideline.

There is scripture that says “You Reap What You Sow” (see Galatians 6:7-9 and 2 Nephi 13:10-11). However, this reaping that is referred to in the scriptures is what happens in the next life. That is when the servants of God will receive an eternal reward, inheriting a mansion in the place where the streets are paved with gold. On that great judgment day, all will realize – and God’s servants will be eternally grateful – that He who has the heavenly gold is the One who makes the rules.



## Boasting – In the Lord? (Alma 26)

In Alma 26, Ammon celebrates with his brothers regarding their missionary successes among the Lamanite people – how God has used them to bring many souls to salvation. He is obviously excited that they have been personally used for this accomplishment, stating “If we had not come up out of the land of Zarahemla, these our dearly beloved brethren...would still have been...strangers to God” (verse 9).

At this point, his brother Aaron rebukes him, saying, “Ammon, I fear that thy joy doth carry thee away unto boasting” (verse 10). Ammon replies, “I do not boast in my own strength...but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things” (verses 11-12). He then continues his rejoicing and “boasting in the Lord”.

What’s the difference between boasting in the Lord and just plain boasting? It all comes down to motivation.

If my motivation in describing accomplishments that I have been involved with is to bring honor and glory to the name of God (as Ammon did above), it can be classified as boasting in the Lord. Of course, in those cases, the way I describe such events should be in language that clearly gives the credit to God and minimizes or omits my own participation. Avoiding the use of “I” can be helpful in ensuring that I succeed in giving all the credit to God.

On the other hand, if my motivation is to gain the praise of others or to build up my own image in some way – in other words, I’m motivated by pride – then I am likely boasting. Examples of this would include statements with excessive use of the word “I” or perhaps descriptions of events that seem to indicate that the outcome was more favorable because I was involved rather than someone else.

Sometimes, the same story can potentially qualify as either. As an example, suppose I tell this story in church: This past week, a brother phoned me and said he wasn’t feeling well. I drove over to his house and anointed him and he was healed.

So, which is it? Boasting or praising God? It depends on the motivation. Perhaps I want to present myself as an important person in the church (the members call me when they have a problem) or a good servant (I give up my time during the week to help others) or even as someone who has an inside track to the throne of God (God responds when I pray). On the other hand,

perhaps I just want people to know that we serve a God who answers prayer and that we can put our faith and trust in Him and perhaps I'm excited, blessed, honored and humbled to be used by God as an instrument to accomplish His purposes.

In an example such as the above, only I can know what my true motivation is. Therefore, I need to examine my motives and make sure I'm praising God, not praising myself. For any of us, this is a good personal test to make sure our heart is where it should be regarding our service to God. As His servants, it shouldn't be about getting credit or being recognized. As long as the work of God is being accomplished and His name is being honored, that's all that matters.

As in the example of Ammon in this chapter, it's not wrong to be excited about being used by God to accomplish great things – as long as we make sure to praise God for the accomplishments. It's not wrong to feel good about ourselves and how much we have grown spiritually – as long as we acknowledge that it's God who has accomplished this work in us. When we understand that all of our accomplishments belong to God, it also makes it easier to accept that salvation is “the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

If we're going to boast, let's boast in the Lord. Let people know we serve an awesome God – one who has changed our lives, one who has redeemed our souls and placed us on the path that leads to eternal life, one who has answered our prayers and performed miracles in our lives and one who can use ordinary people like us to accomplish extraordinary things. We'll be most effective in helping to spread the gospel message if we're found boasting in the Lord.



## When Winning is the Only Thing (Alma 27)

**“Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing” – said by a famous football coach**

Suppose you and your friend have a standing date to play golf together – let’s say once a week. Every week, you get together and shoot 18 holes and you have a great time together. The only thing is your friend is much better at the game than you are and so you never win. What should you do? Here are some options:

- **Just Keep Playing** – If you’re having a great time together, why change anything? Winning isn’t everything.
- **Quit** – If you’re really bothered by never winning, this option will eliminate the bad feeling. But, it doesn’t make you a winner, it only makes you a quitter. Also, you’ve lost the fun thing you were doing with your friend.
- **Change the Rules** – There is such a thing as a “handicap” in golf that allows you to adjust the score and make it look like you’re winning. It may make you feel a little better but, in truth, you’re not really winning.
- **Change Your Opponent** – You probably have other friends who are worse at golf than you are. If you play with one of them, you can win easily.
- **Change the Game** – Maybe you’re a better bowler than your friend. Or better at video games. Or maybe you can hold your breath longer. If winning is the only thing...

But, is winning the only thing? Is it really a victory when you do something different – presumably easier – just to feel like you’re winning?

The Lamanites face this choice in Alma 27. Unsuccessful in doing battle with the Nephites, they take out their anger by attacking a group of fellow Lamanites – the ones known as Anti-Nephi-Lehies – the people who previously buried their weapons and promised God they would never fight again. Having selected an opponent who won’t even fight back, the angry Lamanites “win” this battle, killing many of these innocent people. It accomplishes nothing in their quest to destroy the Nephites but it makes them feel better to win in some way.



As servants of God, we are engaged in spiritual warfare. If we consider winning a soul for Christ as “winning” and any other result as “losing”, we have to sadly admit that we lose a whole lot more often than we win. So, what should we do?

Should we quit? Stop giving our testimony? Stop telling people about the Lord? Stop having church meetings? We won’t “lose” anymore but we can be assured we will never win any either.

How about redefining what it means to win? I could say that having a large number of members in my branch of the Church constitutes winning. However, what if that’s happening because I’m getting members to transfer from other branches to my branch? I might feel good about having more people in my branch but unless souls are coming to Christ, it’s not really winning.

Should we compete with each other? Is it a victory if I win the battle of getting the church walls painted blue rather than green? Or if I get a proposal passed (or defeated) at Conference? We need to make sure we are focused on [Fighting the Real Enemy](#) – he’s out there, not in here.

Should we just seek to be successful in other ways? Making a lot of money, rising to an important position in the company, owning expensive things – these can all constitute winning in life even though they have nothing to do with winning souls for Christ. But, if winning is the only thing...

No, winning for the sake of winning can’t be our primary goal in life. We need to keep moving forward with the plan of God, whatever the success rate is in this particular era of time. We are winners when we allow God to use us for His purposes. Whether this is giving our testimony, inviting people to church, praying for the souls of unbelievers or anything else that God directs, let’s do our best as His servants and leave the results in God’s hands. He wins in the end anyway so if we stay the course, there will come a time when winning is the only thing we will be doing.



## Kingdom Algebra (Alma 28)

When I was in 9th grade, one of my classes was Algebra. Whereas some students (and perhaps you can identify) had a hard time understanding this subject, I actually enjoyed it. It was kind of like trying to solve a mystery – what is the value of the mysterious X?

For those who don't remember (and forgive me if this brings back bad memories), it went something like this:

If  $X + Y = 10$  and  $Y = 3$ , then what is the value of X? In this set of equations, X would be 7 since X and Y together add up to 10 and we already know that Y is 3.  $10 - 3 = 7$ . (I promise that this is as mathematical as this article is going to get).

Now, let's pretend for a moment that when you stand before the Lord at the end of your life, that He assigns a number to you based on how you lived your life – 1 being the worst score and 10 being a perfect score. Perhaps the dialogue would go something like this:

**God:** You get a score of 7 for how you lived your life. That's above average.

**You:** Thank you so much.

**God:** Well, there is actually good news and bad news. You see, the minimum score for entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven is 10.

**You:** Oh no!

**God:** That was the bad news but here's the good news. I see your name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life and my son Jesus knows you. That means you qualify for the grace bonus – in your case, that's an extra 3 points which brings your score to 10 so enter in, my good and faithful servant!

In Kingdom Algebra, the grace of God is the X factor. We do the best we can to live our lives according to the teachings of God but none of us will achieve a perfect score of 10 on our own. Maybe some of us will reach a 9 but others may be a 5 or a 3 or even less. However, even if the best we can do would receive a score of 3, the grace of God is then a 7 for us such that we still wind up with the perfect score of 10.

It is important that we actually do the best we can to live according to the precepts of God. Continuing with the simplified example of a score from 1 to 10, if we're capable of achieving a 9

in life but we intentionally live an unrighteous life such that our score is a 3, we enter questionable territory as to whether God will be willing to award “extra bonus points” to cover our intentional disobedience. Following the Holy Ghost will keep us on the right path.

In Alma 28, Alma is thinking about the many people killed in a recent war. He takes comfort in knowing that the believers “are raised to dwell at the right hand of God, in a state of never-ending happiness” (verse 12). He also reflects on what causes an “inequality” in people such that some get the perfect score and some don’t:

“And thus we see how great the inequality of man is, because of sin and transgression, and the power of the devil, which comes by the cunning plans which he has devised to ensnare the hearts of men” (Alma 28:13).

In general, it’s true to say that God loves everyone equally and He values everyone equally. However, the one thing that makes people unequal in His sight is if they carry sin that has not been forgiven. Coming to Christ and being forgiven of our sins is the only way to become a 10 in God’s sight. Let’s make sure we endure to the end and maintain that perfect score.

Here are some verses you can use if you want to use Kingdom Algebra to present the gospel:

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) – Nobody is a 10

“Come unto Christ, and be perfected in him...that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ” (Moroni 10:32) – Coming to Christ makes us a 10

“Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live; for unto him that endureth to the end will I give eternal life” (3 Nephi 15:9) – Look to Christ for the remainder of our lives to maintain our 10



## Being Content (Alma 29)

In Alma 29, Alma imagines for a moment what it would be like to be an angel. How exciting it would be to go forth with the trumpet of God and speak with a voice of thunder, declaring the plan of redemption to all people! The more he thinks about it, the more exciting of a concept it sounds like and he sort of wishes it could be so. Finally, he returns to reality and actually scolds himself a little for getting carried away with the idea:

“But behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; for I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me” (Alma 29:3)

The concept of being content in life often gets a bad rap. Many people equate being content with “settling” (for something less than you could have or should have) or even with being lazy or unambitious, not wanting to better yourself.

As servants of God, we should consider a different definition of being content. For us, it means being happy that we are exactly where God wants us to be at this point in time. Perhaps things will change in the future or perhaps they won’t but where else would we want to be at any time than where God wants us to be?

There’s nothing wrong with wanting more or trying to improve various things in life but why be unhappy until that something “more” or “better” comes along? What if it never happens? What would it have meant for Alma in the story above to be discontent about not being an angel? He would have been unhappy for the rest of his life instead of being blessed with the life and calling that God gave him.

I recently witnessed a great example of being content during a visit to Dominica, a place which was ravaged by a devastating hurricane last year. Many of the people we saw there have completely lost their homes. Many have lost their sources of income as their crops and livestock were destroyed. Almost everyone lost various personal possessions, ranging from electronic devices to family heirlooms. They are currently living without electricity which still has not been restored after all these months.

In spite of all of the above, we found the people of Dominica to be in surprisingly good spirits. They are thankful that there was no loss of life and they are grateful that God is providing for

them day by day. They of course look forward to the time when electricity will be restored and their houses will be rebuilt but they're not walking around with long faces, saying "woe is me". They are content with where God has them right now, even as they try their best to improve their circumstances. I was blessed to be with them – their contentedness is an example to all of us.

As we consider our own lives, keep in mind that one of the keys to a happy marriage is being content with the spouse God has blessed us with. Or, being content with being unmarried allows us to be used by God in ways that are different than how we can be used when we are married. Being content with what we possess in life is the secret of [how to be exceedingly rich](#) as what we have will meet or exceed the level of what we want. Being content with our spiritual calling allows us to fulfil the responsibilities of whatever position we occupy. Perhaps God will call us to a higher responsibility or perhaps not – regardless, we'll be the best that we can be at whatever position God has assigned to us.

It comes down to a personal choice. Shall we live our life in discontentment with the "ideal life" always just out of reach? Or, can we be content with where we are and trust God that He will provide something more or better if it's His will? The choice that will contribute to a happier life is being content.

**"I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content" (Philippians 4:11)**



## Don't Be Deceived (Alma 30)

Here's a story I sometimes relate when Election Day is approaching:

*Once upon a time, a man died and appeared before God at the gates of heaven. God told the man that he was going to spend one day in heaven and then one day in hell and, after that, he would be permitted to choose which place he wanted to spend eternity in.*

*For his day in heaven, the man was shown the mansion he would live in, he met many of the people mentioned in the scriptures and attended a joyful gathering of the saints, all singing praises to the Lord who was in their midst. It was a very blessed day.*

*The next day, the man was delivered to the gates of hell. He was greeted warmly by Satan who was decked out in a tuxedo. He was taken to an exclusive country club for brunch and was excited to meet many famous celebrities who were members there. In the afternoon, he played a round of golf on an immaculate golf course. After dinner at a five-star restaurant, he went to a party where he met lots of fun people and just had a great time.*

*The next morning, the man told God, "Well, heaven is certainly a great place but I have to say I think the other place would be more fun for me so I'm going to live there". In accordance with his wishes, the man was brought back to the gates of hell.*

*But it was different today. Satan looked much uglier and devil-like now. The temperature was much hotter and the sounds of laughter had been replaced by sounds of weeping and gnashing of teeth. The man was handed a shovel and directed to a nearby pile of coal.*

*"Wait a minute, wait a minute!", the man said. "This isn't right; it wasn't like this yesterday. What happened between yesterday and today?". Satan replied, "Yesterday, we were campaigning. Today, you've voted".*

The above story is, of course, fictional. It is also inaccurate in a very important way – we don't get to choose our eternal home after we've died; no, we actually need to choose our eternal home right now, while we're living this life. And, since the choice is made in this life, be aware that the devil is campaigning very hard right now, trying to get as many people as possible to choose his way. And the campaign seems to be going well – serving God is now depicted by some

as living in a fantasy world and by others as being hateful and intolerant. On the other hand, going against the teachings of Christ is depicted as being more loving and inclusive.

But don't be deceived! If you're looking for a loving environment where all are valued, the kingdom of God is the only choice. The enemy of our soul will make his way look as attractive as possible but it's only to deceive people. Once the "votes" are locked in by death, then those who have chosen his way will see his true colors.

Alma 30 relates the story of a man named Korihor who is described as "Anti-Christ" in that he goes about convincing people that there would be no Christ and that the church leaders have been misleading them to get gain and have power over the people. Finally, Alma calls down the power of God and Korihor is struck dumb such that he can no longer speak. At this point, Korihor realizes he is wrong and writes out the following message:

"Behold, the devil hath deceived me; for he appeared unto me in the form of an angel, and said unto me: Go and reclaim this people, for they have all gone astray...he taught me that which I should say. And I have taught his words; and I taught them because they were pleasing unto the carnal mind; and I taught them, even until I had much success, insomuch that I verily believed that they were true" (Alma 30:53)

Note the key phrases – he was deceived into thinking the followers of God were the ones who had gone astray and needed to be straightened out, his words were pleasing to the human mind and, due to his successful arguments, he convinced himself that the words were true. Until he realized he had been deceived. But then it was too late. Sadly, Korihor is forced to spend the remainder of his days going from house to house, begging for food, which eventually brings about the end of his life:

"As he went forth among them, behold, he was run upon and trodden down, even until he was dead. And thus we see the end of him who perverteth the ways of the Lord; and thus we see that the devil will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell." (Alma 30:59-60)

Don't be deceived! The enemy can appear as an angel of light; he can make his ways appear to be loving, respectful, inclusive, fun, etc. But remember that he just has one goal – to bring you where he is. Put your faith and trust in God – he's the one who truly loves you and will be there for you in the end. Only the power of God can defeat the enemy so make sure that's the way your vote is cast.



## Less Self, More Righteousness (Alma 31)

Alma 31 describes a very unusual church meeting involving a group of people called the Zoramites. The church building described in this chapter contains a very high platform called the Rameumpton and anybody who wishes to worship has to climb up on this platform and shout the words to a specific “prayer” – the same exact words are uttered by each person in turn.

The essence of this prayer is that they are thanking God that they are better than everybody else. They even go as far as to say, “thou hast elected us that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell” (verse 17). Wow, heaven would be a small place if that was accurate.

The above is reminiscent of the parable of Jesus in which He depicted a Pharisee praying in a similar way: “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess” (Luke 18:11-12). Jesus went on to say that this was not the proper attitude to have.

The type of attitude described above is one of self-righteousness. When one is self-righteous, the person may well be living a life that includes activities that are typically pleasing to God. For example, the Zoramites in the story above are attending church and praying regularly while the Pharisee in the parable is staying away from sin, fasting often and donating his fair share. These are all good things to do – perhaps exceeding what some of us do.

However, God is not pleased when we try to take credit for what He has done. We need to understand that we cannot be righteous on our own. The scriptures say, “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). What makes us righteous is the Holy Ghost that is placed within us after we are baptized.

If I’m self-righteous, I’m saying that I did it. I changed my life. I found the right way. I figured out what has to be done. I fast twice in the week. I give tithes of all that I possess. How about giving God the credit for changing my life? For giving me the gift of the Holy Ghost? Again, the activities may be good but my pride is preventing me from recognizing the source of my new way of living. If I could just have less self and more righteousness, I’d be OK.



Since self-righteousness is a prideful condition, it causes us to think we're better than other people. As a result, it manifests itself in the way we treat others.

For example, a self-righteous person trying to "share the gospel" will say things that sound like, "You should change your life to be more like me". Or, "I'm on my way to heaven, you're on your way to hell". As opposed to the approach that puts the credit where it belongs – "God forgave me of my sins and changed my life; He can do the same for you".

Have you ever been in a position of needing to correct someone in church who did something wrong? How do you approach it? Do you let the person know you love them and that you're offering the correction to help them and to help the church? Or do you look down your nose at the person and say in a condescending manner, "We don't do that here", maybe even throwing in a little "harrumph" for emphasis? Which is the self-righteous approach and which is the approach more likely to have a favorable outcome?

If, after some self-examination, we find we have some degree of self-righteousness in us, what is the solution? The best approach is to focus on God as the source of all righteousness. Remember that before we met the Lord, we were sinners and if we didn't have the Holy Ghost today, we would still be sinners. Don't stop doing the good things; just give the credit where it belongs. In other words – less self, more righteousness.



## You Are The Church Building (Alma 32)

In Alma 32, the people who are poor find themselves without a place to worship. The wealthy people – and especially the priests – decide they don't want these poor people in church with them anymore so they forbid them from entering their synagogues. One of the leaders of this displaced group meets with Alma and bemoans their situation:

"They have cast us out of our synagogues...because of our exceeding poverty; and we have no place to worship our God...what shall we do?" (Alma 32:5)

In one way, Alma is actually happy for these people – this experience has made them more humble, putting them in a position to be closer to God – but he does address their concern over the lack of a church building by asking them, "Do ye suppose that ye cannot worship God save it be in your synagogues only?" (verse 10).

Sometimes, it's good for us to ask ourselves the same question. Here are some examples to consider:

- Bad weather has caused our branch of the church to be closed today. Is it a day off from church or can we worship God from home today?
- We're a small group of church members living in a remote location where there is no church building. Are we effectively out of the church or can we get together to worship God anyway?
- Our church building has been sold or condemned or is somehow gone. Is the church gone from that area or can we still worship God together?

Of course, the answer to each of the above questions is that you can worship God anywhere; the church still exists even when there is no physical church building. That's because **you are the church building**.

Wait, that doesn't sound right. Isn't the church building that structure with a roof and four walls and pews and a piano and all that church stuff? How can we be the church building?

OK, maybe we're not exactly interchangeable with the physical church building. However, that building only becomes the Church when we are in it – any other time, it's just an empty structure. Following the same line of thinking, if we get together at someone's home to worship the Lord, that home becomes the Church. Likewise, if we get together for a week at a college campus for a campout, that college campus becomes the Church.

What is the common thread in all of the examples above? It's the people of God – any building you meet in with the people of God to worship the Lord becomes the Church. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). You are in essence a portable church building that carries the Spirit of God wherever you go. The physical church building is just a tool for you to use while you are worshipping.

Of course, many of us love our church building – perhaps we've worshipped there for many years and we have many wonderful memories associated with it. Each building is dedicated for the specific purpose of worship and is a great tool for introducing visitors to the Church – perhaps you met the Church there. However, it's good to keep the above in mind in case the occasion arises when we wind up not using that particular building any longer. Perhaps we'll relocate such that we need to transfer our membership to a different branch. Perhaps our building will be sold as part of a larger Church strategy and we'll be asked to worship in a different location. Wherever you worship, the Church is there – you are the church building.

Hopefully you find it liberating to realize that your worship of God doesn't have to be tied to a specific physical building but don't take this as license to voluntarily skip going to your church building, thinking that you'll just worship God on your own. On the contrary, the message here is that there is really no excuse to not be "in church" all the time. Even if there is no church building available on a given day or for a period of time, don't think you can't worship God – after all, you are the church building.

**"For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building"  
(1 Corinthians 3:9)**



## Typology (Alma 33)

**TYPOLOGY: The study of things in Christian belief that are prefigured or symbolized by things in the Old Testament**

In Alma 33, Alma continues with his teachings to the people who were cast out of the synagogue in the previous chapter. Among the things he teaches them is an episode from the Old Testament in which Moses did something that is considered a “type” of Jesus Christ:

“A type was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live. And many did look and live...But there were many who were so hardened that they would not look, therefore they perished” (Alma 33:19-20)

The episode referenced above is found in Numbers 21 where many Israelites were dying as a result of being bitten by poisonous snakes. At the direction of God, Moses set up a serpent of brass on a pole and told those who were bitten to look at it. Those who did so were healed and lived but many refused to look and so they died from the poison.

What makes this a type of Jesus Christ is that you can tell the same story from a spiritual perspective, replacing the serpent of brass in the story with Jesus: Mankind is afflicted with the poison of sin and is told to look to Jesus who was raised up on the cross. Those who do so are healed from their sins and will live eternally. Those who are so hardened that they refuse to look to Jesus will die in their sins.

People who engage in typology have gone through the Old Testament and identified many such types that line up with the story of Jesus Christ. Some of the writers of the New Testament and of the Book of Mormon were versed in typology as they identified some types as well:

- The Israelites received bread (manna) from heaven; Jesus is the true bread from heaven (John 6:30-35)
- “For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40)

- “The blood of bulls and of goats...sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ...purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Hebrews 9:13-14)
- “It was accounted unto Abraham in the wilderness to be obedient...in offering up his son Isaac, which is a similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son” (Jacob 4:5)
- Regarding the Liahona: “And now I say, is there not a type in this thing? For just as surely as this director did bring our fathers, by following its course, to the promised land, shall the words of Christ, if we follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise.” (Alma 37:45)

At a time when Christian values are being attacked all around us, it's good to have as many tools as possible at our disposal to support the divinity of Jesus Christ. Typology is one of these as it shows that the plan of redemption – with Jesus Christ as its center – was in place from the very beginning with the earliest scriptures giving clues to what would occur. Count it a blessing to be part of God's long-term plan for mankind.



## The Last Sacrifice (Alma 34)

Up until this point in the narrative, the Nephites – as all God-fearing Israelites were expected to be doing at the time – were performing sacrifices as directed by the Law of Moses. A couple of examples were when Lehi’s family was traveling in the wilderness (1 Nephi 5:9) and when the people of King Benjamin gathered at the temple to hear his final address (Mosiah 2:3).

The Law of Moses provided for different types of sacrifices for a variety of purposes but a primary reason for the people to sacrifice was to atone for their sins. In these instances, killing an animal (typically, one that they owned) and burning its body as an offering to God was the prescribed way of obtaining forgiveness from God for sins committed.

In Alma 34, Amulek describes what he refers to as a “great and last sacrifice” that would provide atonement for all mankind:

“It is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice; and then shall there be...a stop to the shedding of blood; then shall the law of Moses be fulfilled...that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal” (Alma 34:13-14)

This great and last sacrifice was to be Jesus Christ, the Son of God. By shedding His blood, Jesus would atone for all the sins of mankind throughout the ages of time. No longer would it be necessary to kill animals to obtain forgiveness from God; repentance and faith in Christ would be all that would be necessary. This arrangement continues down to today.

It’s an important distinction to note that after Jesus shed His blood, not only did sacrifice become unnecessary to atone for sins – it became **incapable** of atoning for sins. How could Jesus be the last sacrifice if people could continue with their own sacrifices to atone for sin? What would have been the point of Jesus going to the cross at all?

Why does this have meaning to us today? Chances are we’re not going out in our backyards and burning animals to try to get God to forgive us for things we have done wrong. However, there are ways we can sacrifice something dear to us – such as our time or money – that we may mistakenly think make up for things we have done wrong.

For example, I've sometimes heard people (from various faiths) say something like, "I have to go to church this Sunday because I really messed up this week". If the person is going to church with the intention to repent and become closer to God, that's a good thing. On the other hand, if the person thinks that one Sunday in church makes up for one sin and now it's "all even", the person is mistaken, thinking that this "sacrifice" has atoned for the sin.

In some faiths, people are instructed to say the same words over and over again in order to obtain forgiveness for their sins. The more serious the sin, the more times they have to say the words. Even aside from the fact that Jesus said not to use "vain repetitions", this is another case of thinking that a person's own sacrifice can atone for their sins. If you're going to spend the time talking to God, it would be better to acknowledge your sin to Him, repent and ask for His forgiveness, relying on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to give you the confidence that God will actually forgive you.

Taking the above a step further, there was once a church that required their people to pay a specified amount of money to the church when they committed a sin. Each type of sin had a price tag – the more serious the sin, the higher the price to be forgiven of it. It even reached a point where people were prepaying for their sins – here's \$100, now God owes me forgiveness for my next 10 sins!

Of course, it's admirable – and even expected of a servant of God – to donate money to the church. However, God's forgiveness cannot be purchased with money – it's already been purchased by the blood of Christ. Any sacrifices we may make for the Lord – whether our time, money or anything else – should be freely offered as a result of our love for Him and appreciation for what He has already done for us, not used as an attempt to obtain additional favors from Him.

While it's human nature to want to try to make up for things we've done wrong, let's recognize that God has a better way. When we were baptized, all of our sins were forgiven. As we serve God, we can repent of any additional transgressions and be forgiven of those as well. And it's all because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. It's such an all-encompassing sacrifice that it's the last sacrifice that will ever be required by God. Thank God we're covered by it.



## A Divisive Message (Alma 35)

**Divisive: Tending to cause disagreement between people and causing them to separate into different groups**

In Alma 35, the Zoramites react to the message of Christ preached to them by Alma and Amulek in the previous chapters in which they were exhorted to repent of their sins and change their lives to be more Christ-like. Although the exact discussion is not recorded, you can easily imagine it going something like this:

- Why do we need to repent? We're not doing anything wrong.
- Why can't we just love and accept everyone the way they are instead of trying to change people?
- This is a divisive message – we need to be more inclusive of everyone.

Finally, the Zoramites decide to poll everyone to see who agrees with the message and who doesn't. In order to illustrate what is apparently meant by inclusiveness, "after they had found out the minds of the people, those who were in favor of the words which had been spoken by Alma and his brethren were cast out of the land" (verse 6). In other words, all views, beliefs and preferences are welcome except living a life for Jesus Christ.

OK, so once these divisive believers in Christ are out of the city, the Zoramites settle down to a peaceful and loving life, right? They probably even wish their former brethren well in their new home with the people of Ammon in Jerushon, don't they? After all, it's all about love. Here's what actually happens:

"Now the people of the Zoramites were angry with the people of Ammon who were in Jerushon, and...[they demanded that] the people of Ammon...should cast out of their land all those who came over from [the Zoramites] into their land...The people of Ammon did not cast them out...This did stir up the Zoramites to anger against the people of Ammon, and they...began to make preparations for war against the people of Ammon" (Alma 35:8-11)

So, these Zoramite people who aren't doing anything wrong and have no need of repentance and don't see a need for anyone to change are so filled with hate for their former brethren that they want them homeless, punished or even dead. All because they believe in the message of Christ.



Surely, something like this couldn't happen today. Or could it? Or is it happening already?

We need to realize that as followers of Christ, we do represent a divisive message.

The scriptures teach that Jesus is the only way to heaven. They teach that all have sinned and need repentance. They teach that certain behaviors are just plain wrong and that people need to make changes in their lives to be servants of God. All of these statements will cause severe disagreement among people and may well bring about separation between people who believe them and people who don't.

Jesus actually said, "I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother" (Matthew 10:35). He also said He will judge the nations and "separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats". (Matthew 25:32). In Nephi's vision, Nephi was told that there would eventually be two churches (two, not one) – the church of the Lamb of God and the church of the devil (1 Nephi 14:10). We of course believe that there are two distinct places that people go when they leave this life. Yes, we are preaching a divisive message.

However, among those who belong to the kingdom of God, there is no divisiveness, only inclusion. All who desire to accept Christ as their savior – through faith, repentance and baptism – and are willing to have the Holy Ghost lead their lives are welcome. All are loved equally by God. All consider each other brothers and sisters in Christ.

The same cannot be said for the opponents of Christ. Without the scriptures as a basis, these people gather around whatever the cause of the day is and routinely disagree with those who have opposing views. The one thing they seem to agree on is that anyone who stands for Christ is the enemy and their goal is to eliminate such people (as the Zoramites tried to do in the story above) or at least make them ineffective in the cause of Christ.

So, although there is a negative connotation attached to the word "divisive" in today's world, don't allow yourself to be bullied into watering down the gospel message. Don't seek to be disagreeable; don't seek to divide – just represent the gospel in love and let others react as they will. If someone wants to call that divisive, let them take it up with the Lord.



## Remind Me, Dear Lord (Alma 36)

For the next several chapters, Alma takes some time to share advice, counsel and teaching with each of his three sons – Helaman (chapters 36-37), Shiblon (chapter 38) and Corianton (chapters 39-42).

In Alma 36, Alma remembers what type of man he was before he gave his life to the Lord. He recalls that he had rebelled against God, not keeping His commandments, and that he “went about with the sons of Mosiah, seeking to destroy the church of God” (verse 6). He would have continued along this destructive path but his eyes were finally opened by the appearance of an angel who spoke to him with a voice of thunder. Alma describes what happened after the angel spoke to him:

“I was racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sins. Yea, I did remember all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell.” (Alma 36:12-13)

All this torment was then replaced with the joy of salvation through Christ. The memory of his sins didn’t haunt him any longer. In fact, he says, “My soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!” (verse 20).

If the memory of his sin was so painful, why does Alma recall it at this time for his son? Perhaps the memories some of us have of our own sins are painful as well. Is there any value in recalling these memories or are they better left buried?

On the one hand, it’s good to know that the person who we were before we met the Lord no longer exists and that we don’t have to feel guilty about the things that person did. Living in the past is not necessary and can in fact rob us of our joy if we continue to dwell on that.

On the other hand, remembering where we came from and comparing that to where we are today has some benefits as well:

- It gives us an appreciation for what the Lord has done for us – It’s our testimony!

- It allows us to feel good about ourselves (but not too good) – When we’re feeling bad about ourselves, it’s good to see how much we’ve grown spiritually from then until now. On the other hand, lest we get too prideful, it’s good to recognize that no matter how good we may think we are today, we weren’t always this way. If we hadn’t met the Lord, we would be totally different.
- It allows us to interact more comfortably with those who are still in a sinful condition – We can appreciate that people in this position are not bad people and are not beneath us but rather are just in the same condition we were in before we met the Lord. Also, since many of these people think there is no way they can ever be like us, we can let them know that the Lord can change their lives just as He did for us.

So, while it’s not recommended that you dwell in the past, there is some benefit to occasionally looking back to appreciate the journey you’re on and how far you’ve come. Of course, don’t forget to thank God for bringing you from where you were then to where you are now.

### **Chorus of “Remind Me, Dear Lord”**

Roll back the curtain of memory now and then  
Show me where you brought me from  
And where I could have been  
Remember I'm human, and humans forget  
So remind me, remind me dear Lord



## Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep (Alma 37)

In Alma 37, Alma turns over the sacred records to his son Helaman and instructs him on the importance of maintaining them and keeping them up to date going forward such that they can continue to be passed on, eventually coming forth to benefit future generations.

He then adds a piece of advice in verse 37 that we often quote today (makes it easy to remember – chapter 37, verse 37):

“Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good; yea, when thou liest down at night lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God” (Alma 37:37)

Perhaps when you were a child (at least if you’re as old as I am), your parents may have taught you a simple prayer to say at night when you were getting ready for bed. It would have gone something like this:

*Now I lay me down to sleep  
I pray Thee Lord, my soul to keep  
If I should die before I wake  
I pray Thee Lord, my soul to take  
If I should live for other days  
I pray Thee Lord, to guide my ways*

If you think about it, this sounds a little bit like Alma 37:37 (except for the rhyming part). We’re speaking to God as we prepare to sleep, putting ourselves in His hands, looking forward to arising the next day and seeking his guidance for whatever He would have us to do.

As an adult, you likely don’t say the words above but hopefully you haven’t gotten away from the practice of speaking to the Lord before laying down to sleep at night. Yes, it’s true that you can speak to Him at any time of the day (and you should be) but maintaining the routine of speaking to him before going to sleep has several advantages:

- It ensures that you are maintaining a consistent pattern of communication with God
- It allows you to review the day with Him and thank Him for all He did for you

- It allows you to look ahead to the next day(s) and seek His counsel and assistance for what is coming up
- And yes, it allows you to ask God to watch over you while you sleep and perhaps even communicate with you in some way during the night

There have been several occasions in my life when God has communicated with me during the night. There were times when I was blessed with meaningful dreams that gave me direction and encouragement when I needed it.

There was even one time when I spoke to the Lord before going to sleep and asked Him to help my team at work to figure out a software design problem we had encountered that day. When I woke up the next morning, the first thought in my head was the exact solution to the problem. (You should have seen the faces of the other team members at the office when I shared the solution with them and then told them I had prayed about it and God gave me the answer!).

We may only work from sunup to sundown but God is at work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. So, as you prepare to lie down for the night, God is there, ready to review your day with you and provide counsel for the day(s) to come. Take advantage of the opportunity – He will direct you for good.



## Diligent in the Work of the Lord (Alma 38)

In Alma 38, Alma shares some words with his middle son Shiblon. He commends Shiblon who appears to be not flashy but quietly steady, faithful and diligent in the work of the Lord. You probably know people like this today or perhaps you would even consider this a description of yourself. People like this are rarely recognized for their efforts so it's good that Alma takes time to recognize his son's efforts here.

Shiblon has begun teaching the word of God to the people and Alma encourages him to continue in the same way with this work:

"And now, as ye have begun to teach the word even so I would that ye should continue to teach; and I would that ye would be diligent and temperate in all things" (Alma 38:10)

Whereas words like "steady" or "faithful" typically apply to general service to God – such as someone who is steady in church attendance or faithful to a particular belief system – the word "diligent" applies to working. In fact, being diligent is defined as "having or showing care and conscientiousness in one's work or duties".

So, what does it mean to be diligent in the work of the Lord? To me, it means getting past the initial euphoria of a new job or assignment associated with the Lord's work and continuing either until the end of the project (if it's a project) or continuing to do the job on a regular basis for as long as you are in the position. Here are some examples:

- The sole minister in a mission who is ready to deliver a message every Sunday
- The Sunday School teacher who has a lesson prepared every Sunday
- The deacon who proactively makes sure the church building is prepared and comfortable for the congregation every Sunday
- The missionary who continues to work with a mission field through ups and downs over a long period of time
- The coordinator of a large event (such as a campout) who makes sure all necessary tasks are completed for the success of the event
- The editor and staff of church publications (such as the Gospel News or Gospel Blog) who repetitively perform the tasks necessary to produce the publication over and over and over again

What do all of the above have in common? They involve someone performing tasks, typically on their own time, perhaps over a long period of time, perhaps repetitively, preferably proactively to further the work of the Lord. They often involve efforts that can be easily overlooked yet the failure to perform these efforts will result in a visibly negative impact on the work of the Lord. Thus, there is reason to appreciate those who are diligent in the work of the Lord.

So, if diligence – a good work ethic – is a strength for you, consider volunteering to work for the church. Since workers for the church are strictly volunteer labor, it's often the case that those who volunteer have a hard time exercising diligence for very long. You can surely make a difference in what the church can do if you are diligent in the work of the Lord.



## Ministry and Sin Don't Mix (Alma 39)

There is an old proverb that states, "Oil and Water don't mix". This is based on the observation that the two stay separate when attempts are made to mix them together. The saying is typically used to describe people or characteristics that don't seem to go together – they don't mix well.

In Alma 39, Alma reprimands his son Corianton for trying to mix ministry and sin. Called to be a young minister, Corianton goes on a missionary trip among the Zoramites during which he goes over to a different city and spends time with a prostitute named Isabel. Clearly, this is not what was expected when Corianton was brought on the trip and he in fact jeopardizes the entire mission by his actions.

While instructing his son, Alma makes several key points that pertain to us today. His advice is good for any member of the church but it is especially pertinent to members of the ministry who others look to as examples and sources of spiritual counsel.

### **If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you follow?**

Alma acknowledges that Corianton was not the only one seduced by this woman but points out that this is not an excuse for forsaking one's ministry:

"Yea, she did steal away the hearts of many; but this was no excuse for thee, my son. Thou shouldst have tended to the ministry wherewith thou wast entrusted." (Alma 39:4)

The more accepted or widespread a certain action becomes, the more it seems like it's not a big deal for any of us to do it or support it. However, just like when our children make statements like, "But everybody does it", the correct way to look at it is that when something is wrong, it's wrong no matter how many others are doing it or think there's nothing wrong with it.

The Word of God defines what is sin and what is not. Changing times don't define it, elections or political parties don't define it – only God defines it. As God's representatives, it is up to us to not only defend God's definition of what is right and what is wrong but to also make sure the choices we make in our own lives reflect that.

### **It's not just your business**



We often hear statements like, “What I do is my business” or “God knows my heart” when sinful actions are brought to someone’s attention. In other words – don’t judge me, mind your own business.

However, especially when members of the ministry are involved, sinful actions hurt us all. Alma informs Corianton that “when [the Zoramites] saw your conduct they would not believe in **my** words” (verse 11). Not only did Corianton compromise his own credibility among the people being preached to, he caused them to doubt the words of all the representatives of the church, including the high priest Alma. Could he really say this was just his business?

Likewise, our actions today can have an effect on the credibility of the message of the church, causing others to think we’re all hypocrites. Sinful conditions can also limit the effectiveness of the prayer efforts of the church. It’s really not just our business.

### **Repent and keep going**

Based on the above, Alma would have been justified in removing Corianton from the ministry and sending him home. Instead, he offers him a path to continue in the ministry:

- Repent – For the sake of his relationship with God, Alma urges him to repent of his sin. Likewise, any of us can and should repent when we make mistakes.
- Learn from his mistake so as not to repeat it – Alma instructs his son, “forsake your sins, and go no more after the lusts of your eyes” (verse 10). If we are sincerely repentant, we will do our best to not repeat our mistakes.
- Accept instruction, be accountable – In order to show that he is dealing with the sin and also giving Corianton a better chance to be successful going forward, Alma tells Corianton that he will be accountable to his older brothers for a period of time and that he should accept whatever counsel they will give him. If we are susceptible to a certain type of sin, perhaps we can benefit from making ourselves accountable to someone else and/or seeking tips on how others dealt with the same type of situation. As a minister trying to come back from a sinful condition, some visible action should be taken to begin the process of regaining credibility.

After the above steps, Corianton is able to resume his ministry so presumably he worked hard enough to regain the credibility necessary to function in that capacity. Having credibility is so critical to functioning in the ministry that some who are unable to reestablish it sadly cannot continue in that capacity. If, however, we are blessed with this type of second chance to use our gifts and talents to work for the Lord, let’s do our best this time around to remember that ministry and sin don’t mix.



## OK, You're Dead – What Happens Next? (Alma 40)

Alma 40 reveals information that is of great interest to many people and is not spelled out as plainly anywhere else in the Word of God – it tells us what happens right after we pass from this life. It's not too surprising that this information is not more readily available since anybody who has experienced this is not exactly in a position to write about it for us. In the case of Alma, he has an inside source – an angel has shared the information with him – so we can benefit from knowing what he was told. We all know we're going to die someday – here's what happens next:

### Step 1 – The Soul Leaves the Body and Returns to God

*"The spirits of all men, as soon as they are departed from this mortal body...whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life" (Alma 40:11)*

It is important to recognize that the soul is an actual entity – it exists. As such, it does not disappear when life on earth ends – it leaves the body at that time and then it needs to go somewhere. Where it goes is back to God who then determines for each individual soul where it will reside until its resurrection day – see Step 2A and 2B below for the two possibilities.

### Step 2A – Paradise

*"The spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow" (Alma 40:12)*

Paradise is not Heaven – it is a resting place for the souls of the righteous as they await their resurrection and final consignment to Heaven. When Jesus was on the cross and one of the thieves hanging next to Him recognized Him as Lord, Jesus said to him, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

### Step 2B – Outer Darkness

*"The spirits of the wicked, yea, who are evil – for behold, they have no part nor portion of the Spirit of the Lord...shall be cast out into outer darkness, there shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth" (Alma 40:13)*

As with Paradise, Outer Darkness is not the final home for the souls of the wicked – it’s a place where they await their resurrection. However, it’s not really a restful place – these souls are in “a state of awful, fearful looking for the fiery indignation of the wrath of God upon them” (verse 14). Thus, the weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth.

There was an occasion (recorded in Matthew 8) when Jesus recognized the faith of a centurion (a Gentile) and healed his servant of a serious illness. He remarked that many Gentiles would eventually enter the kingdom of heaven but that many Israelites would be “cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 8:12). Similar references to Outer Darkness can be found in Matthew 22:13 and 25:30.

### **Step 3 – Resurrection**

*“There is a space between death and the resurrection of the body, and a state of the soul in happiness or misery until the time which is appointed of God that the dead shall come forth” (Alma 40:21)*

The first resurrection occurred about 2000 years ago when Christ resurrected along with all who had died prior to that time – “many bodies of the saints which slept arose...after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many” (Matthew 27:52-53).

Everyone who has died since that time is waiting for one of the future resurrections. When that time arrives, each soul will be united with a spiritual version of their body. Any missing body parts will be restored to this body – even if you’ve lost your hair, it will be restored.

Each person then stands before God to be judged and assigned to their final home. Although it is called a judgment, your final home is already determined by where you are sent after you die. Only those who were in Paradise inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Those who were in Outer Darkness experience a “second death”.

Presumably, all of us wants to follow the Paradise/Heaven path described above. Let’s make sure we’re on the right path now and let’s help others get on the right path as well. Then all of us can be numbered among “the righteous [who] shine forth in the kingdom of God” (verse 25) for all eternity.



## Kingdom Hashtags (Alma 41)

Depending on how familiar you are with social media, you may or may not be familiar with the term “hashtags” or how they are used. Briefly, hashtags (designated by the symbol #) are used to group together social media postings and photos under a single heading for easy retrieval.

For example, if you open a web browser and type #alma41, you will see a varied collection of photos and commentaries that people (from various faiths) have posted relating to Alma 41. This article will show up in that list as well. If you type #TCOJC, you will see a wide variety of photographs, posted (mostly) by members of our church.

In Alma 41, Alma defines the word “restoration” as a process that will occur when we stand before God at the end of our lives. Similar to hashtags, it will be a retrieval of events that have been categorized in various ways during our lives:

“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” (Alma 41:13)

The primary reason that Alma is sharing this with his son (who had recently been caught up in sin) is to impress upon him the importance of staying on the right path going forward. He adds that God does not intend to “take a thing of a natural state and place it in an unnatural state, or to place it in a state opposite to its nature” (verse 12).

In other words, if we type #TCOJC in a web browser, we would not expect to see images of the devil appearing. Likewise, if we were to type some hashtag related to devil worship, we would not expect to see photos of our church members popping up.

So, if we desire to dwell in the kingdom of God for eternity, let’s make sure we begin with events that can be assigned hashtags of #faith, #repentance, #baptism and #HolyGhost. As we live our life, let’s do our best – through the direction of the Holy Ghost – to record events that can be assigned hashtags of #good, #righteous, #just and #merciful. There are of course many other good ones as well.

There are also plenty of evil hashtags too. We won't list those here so this article won't be linked to them. Let's be careful that the events of our life aren't linked to them either.

If the end of our life can be categorized under #EnduredToTheEnd, then our soul will be included in the hashtag #Paradise. Then, on resurrection day, when God consults the hashtag #LambsBookOfLife, our name will appear and our eternal home will be categorized by the hashtags #Heaven, #KingdomOfGod and #EternalHappiness.



## Justice For All (Alma 42)

Revenge against someone who has wronged you. Prosecution, conviction and imprisonment for committing a crime. Condemnation by God for sins committed. All of these can be described by the word “justice”.

When we recite the “Pledge of Allegiance” and end with words describing our country as a place where there is “justice for all”, which of the above are we wishing on everybody?

Clearly, there has to be more to justice than penalties, punishments and paybacks. There is – the actual definition of the word includes an aspect of fairness and impartiality. Looking at it that way, when we say “justice for all”, we are claiming fair treatment for all.

Fair treatment for all is a noble goal but it’s one we’ll always fall far short of in this life. People are inherently flawed and therefore not able to create or administer a system in which everyone is treated perfectly fairly, getting exactly what they deserve – whether a reward or a penalty.

The only truly fair system of justice is the one created and administered by God. He is the only one who can be completely fair and impartial – He is not a respecter of persons; He can’t be bought off; He doesn’t look the other way if a friend is involved. So, although we may not like to think about someone being punished for their sins, we can be assured that each person gets exactly what he deserves – it is a completely fair process.

In Alma 42, Alma addresses the need for God’s system of justice as he concludes his comments to his son Corianton:

“Ye cannot understand...for ye do try to suppose that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery...If there was no law given against sin men would not be afraid to sin...The law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God” (Alma 42:1,20,22)

To summarize the above, God put a system in place to dissuade people from sinning, including associated punishments. With this system of justice in place, God must follow through with the punishment in each case or else it’s no longer a fair system – the system would then be destroyed and “God would cease to be God”.

However, in spite of this system, “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). So, if justice demands a punishment for our sins, we’re all “in the grasp of...the justice of God,...forever to be cut off from his presence” (verse 14).

Based on this, it would seem that heaven would be a lonely place for God since nobody would be eligible to go there. Perhaps some exceptions could be made for some people? No, that wouldn’t be fair – it wouldn’t be justice for all.

So, God created a “plan of redemption” in which His son Jesus Christ would come to earth and be punished for the sins of all mankind. Under this plan, there would be no need for any further punishment for people – God could offer mercy to the repentant such that people would be eligible to enter the kingdom of heaven.

This plan is available equally (fairly) to all people today. All that is required to enroll in the plan is faith in Jesus, repentance and baptism. The Holy Ghost then provides the rest of the directions needed to stay in God’s grace through life and eventually reap all the benefits of the plan.

God’s plan of redemption is designed to “appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” (verse 15). Sign up today! It’s the only plan in existence that truly provides justice for all.



## Haters Never Prosper (Alma 43)

In Alma 43, war breaks out again between the Nephites and the Lamanites. In this chapter, we are introduced to a young man named Moroni – only 25 years of age – who is selected to lead the Nephite army.

In the description of this particular battle, it is mentioned several times that the motivation of the two armies is completely different. The Lamanites have been taught for generations to hate the Nephites – they are in this battle purely to act on that hatred and destroy the Nephite nation. On the other hand:

“The Nephites were inspired by a better cause...they were fighting for their homes and their liberties, their wives and their children, and their all, yea, for their rites of worship and their church” (Alma 43:45)

With the strength of the Lord on their side, the Nephite army is victorious in this battle, in spite of facing a Lamanite army that is more than double their size. Since the Nephites are not motivated by hatred, Moroni calls an end to the battle as soon as it is clear that their defense of their homes and families has been successful. They have no desire to kill and destroy – they are just protecting what God has given them.

Today, we are in a battle of our own, trying to protect what God has given us – the gospel of Jesus Christ. The stakes in our battle are the souls of mankind. The weapons being used by the enemy are sinful lifestyles that are being made to look attractive. An extremely effective strategy has been to equate the acceptance of such lifestyles to being a loving person. The choice is spun to look like this:

Accept/Support sinful lifestyles = You’re a loving person who loves and respects everyone

Reject sinful lifestyles = You’re an intolerant, hateful person (a “hater”)

It’s easy to see why this strategy is so effective. After all, most people want to feel that they are loving people. Who wants to be referred to as a hater?

Our challenge is to make sure the above perception is not the reality. Yes, it may be uncomfortable to be exposed to certain types of sinful lifestyles. Yes, it may grate on you when



“in your face” tactics are used to get a reaction from you. Yes, when we realize that those who oppose us include many people who actually are hateful and intolerant (toward people like us), it may be tempting to respond in kind. However, as the people of God, our calling is not to hate people – it’s to love people.

We could say that its “not nice” to hate – but it’s more than that. We could say that we shouldn’t be that type of people – but it’s even more than that. As the Lamanites experienced in the battle referenced above, battle strategy motivated by hate is just not a winning strategy.

If our goal is to build the kingdom of God, hate will not do it. Hate seeks to hurt and destroy – even if successful, it doesn’t bring us any closer to building the kingdom of God. On the other hand, love seeks to make connections, draw people and show them a better way – a more joyful way.

So, while we stand firm on defending the precepts of God, let’s not allow ourselves to slip into the mode of doing so in an unloving manner. If people want to call us haters for not accepting every possible lifestyle, that’s their business – let’s not live up to the name though. If we want to defeat the enemy, we can’t play his game.

I like the scripture that encourages us to win the battle against an enemy by showing him kindness – “for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:20-21).



## A Key Part of Repentance (Alma 44)

After having defeated the Lamanite army in the previous chapter, Moroni, the leader of the Nephite army, lays out some terms to Zerahemnah, the leader of the Lamanite army, in Alma 44. Moroni offers to spare the lives of the remaining Lamanite soldiers if they surrender their weapons of war, leave the Nephite land and promise to never return to war against the Nephites again.

Zerahemnah readily agrees to the first two points – he tells Moroni, “take our weapons of war, and suffer that we may depart into the wilderness” (verse 8). However, he is not willing to make the promise to never return for another war, telling Moroni, “we will not...take an oath unto you, which we know that we shall break” (verse 8).

Let’s give Zerahemnah a little credit for honesty here. The easy thing to do would be to say whatever he is asked to say at the time and then do whatever he wants to do later. Instead, he takes the position that he will only make a promise if he intends to keep it.

For each of us today, this same concept of making a promise with all intentions of living up to it is a key part of repentance.

For some people, if you ask them what repentance means, they will tell you it means being sorry for something you’ve done wrong. Repentance does include being sorry but that’s only part of it. The other part is promising – whether to yourself, to other people and/or to God – that you will do your best to not engage in the same sinful behavior going forward.

Recalling the day of your baptism – or one you witnessed if yours is still in the future – you were asked two questions. The first was “Do you repent of your sins?” (Are you sorry for what you’ve done wrong?). The second was “Do you promise to serve God to the best of your ability for the remainder of your life?” (Will you do your best to not engage in sinful behavior going forward?).

Presumably, you answered “Yes” to both questions or your baptism would not have occurred. Hopefully, you were truthful in your responses to both questions as opposed to just giving the answer that was expected. If you didn’t have the feeling at that moment that you were going to do your best to avoid sin going forward, you weren’t truly repentant – a key part of repentance was missing.

Of course, as much as we may try to be perfect, none of us is and we all sometimes engage in behaviors that we shouldn't – our best intentions sometimes fall by the wayside due to competition from other desires and distractions. When that happens, we can repent again and God forgives us again – as long as our repentance includes an intention to not repeat the same behavior going forward. It's possible that we still may repeat it anyway. If so, it doesn't mean our repentance was insincere – unless we knew at the time that we had no intention of changing our behavior. Saying we're sorry with no intention of changing is not repentance at all – a key part is missing.

When Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery, he ended with the words, “go, and sin no more” (John 8:11). We don't know what the woman did after that but, if she was truly repentant – as opposed to just being grateful to not have been stoned – she would have gone forth with the intention to change her ways. On the other hand, if her thought was, “Yeah, right – I'm going back to my boyfriend's bed now”, then there was no repentance – and therefore no forgiveness in heaven – since a key part of repentance was missing.

So, if we find ourselves in a sinful condition or realize that we've done something wrong, let's be quick to repent but let's do it completely. Following the example of the Lamanite army captain, let's not make a promise to change if we don't intend to follow through with it. And, if we can't tell God that we want to change – perhaps asking him for the strength to help us do so – there's not much point in telling Him we're sorry until we're ready to proceed with that key part of repentance.



## One Phrase to Represent Your Life (Alma 45)

In Alma 45, there is a change in church leadership as Alma passes this responsibility to his son Helaman. Helaman also is given responsibility for maintaining the Nephite record at this point – this chapter is the first written by Helaman. After Alma turns over the sacred records to his son, he somewhat mysteriously departs from the land of Zarahemla and is never heard from again. The people surmise that he may have been “buried by the hand of the Lord, even as Moses” (verse 19), as recorded in Deuteronomy 34:5-6, or even taken up by the Lord. Regardless, Alma’s time on earth has ended and a new era has begun. Helaman makes one statement that describes the life of Alma: **“He was a righteous man”**.

When the time comes for us to depart from this life, wouldn’t it be wonderful if the one phrase that someone chose to represent our life would be, “This was a righteous person”?

Based on your life so far, what phrase would best represent your life? What would you like it to be? Some people have such phrases (known as epitaphs) printed on their tombstones. What phrase would you want to have permanently displayed with your name for all to see?

Is there a phrase that summarizes how you lived your life? Is your identity tied to your natural profession? Perhaps you would choose to be remembered as a wonderful mother, father, husband, wife, etc. Here are some examples of these from actual tombstones:

- Died Oct 27, 1881 – She lived each day as if it were her last, especially this one
- Sir John Strange – Here lies an honest lawyer, And that is Strange
- He was a good husband, a wonderful father, but a bad electrician

Aside from the humorous twists, these are all nice tributes. If any of us are remembered this way, that would be wonderful. However, what a blessing it would be to be remembered as a servant of God. If there was one phrase to represent your life, would it include God? It doesn’t have to be put on your tombstone but let’s live our lives in a way that will make people remember us as servants of God.

Here’s a little quiz for you. In the table below, there are 10 epitaphs from actual tombstones. See if you can match each to the appropriate name in the column on the right – most of these

names were celebrities in years past. Apologies to our younger readers who may not recognize these names – the celebrities you are familiar with are mostly still alive!

<b>Epitaph</b>	<b>Person's Name</b>
1. That's All Folks	A. Will Rogers
2. There Goes the Neighborhood	B. Jackie Gleason
3. Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty I'm Free at Last.	C. Merv Griffin
4. All dressed up and no place to go	D. W.C. Fields
5. I will not be right back after this message	E. Mel Blanc
6. Pardon me for not rising	F. Dean Martin
7. And away we go	G. Rodney Dangerfield
8. I never met a man I didn't like	H. John Yeast
9. Everybody loves somebody sometime	I. Martin Luther King
10. I would rather be in Philadelphia	J. Unnamed Atheist

Answers: 1-E, 2-G, 3-I, 4-J, 5-C, 6-H, 7-B, 8-A, 9-F, 10-D



## Raise Up the Standard (Alma 46)

### STANDARD

- 1: a conspicuous object (such as a banner) carried at the top of a pole and used to mark a rallying point, especially in battle
- 2: something established by authority, custom, or general consent as a model or example
- 3: substantially uniform
- 4: having recognized and permanent value

In Alma 46, Moroni, the leader of the Nephite army, sets up a standard to rally the Nephite people around some common causes. He creates the flag or banner by ripping up his coat and writing the message on a piece of it. Here is the message:

“In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives and our children”  
(Alma 46:12)

The above is known as the “title of liberty” and when it later catches on and is placed upon every tower in the land, it becomes known as the “standard of liberty”.

Depending what you’re talking about, it can be very important to understand what constitutes a standard. For example, when you buy a car, there will typically be certain features that are referred to as standard equipment. This means that every car carries those features so you know that you’ll get those features regardless of which car you buy. Additional features may be added to make that car unique but the standard equipment will always be there.

When you have a standard cause as the Nephites did in the story above, it means that everyone in the group agrees on the cause, however different the people may be otherwise. In this particular case, everyone is able to agree that it is worth fighting to defend their God, religion, freedom, peace, wives and children – this allows sufficient enthusiasm to be generated for everyone to participate in the battle. The standard of liberty reminds everyone what they are fighting for.

The Church of Jesus Christ today has its own set of standards that we expect (hope) each of our members has incorporated into their own belief system and are willing to stand up for. These

standard beliefs are referred to as the Faith & Doctrine and are summarized on this web page: <http://www.thechurchofjesuschrist.org/about/our-beliefs>.

Beyond these beliefs, there is plenty of room for individuality but these particular beliefs should be considered “standard equipment” for the members of the Church. It’s interesting that some of these beliefs fall into the same categories that Moroni included in the title of liberty:

**God** – We believe in God the Father, Jesus Christ His Son and the Holy Spirit

**Religion** – The beliefs of our religion include the following: Jesus Christ is the Savior through which salvation is made available to mankind, the gospel of Jesus Christ once fell away and was later restored, the Bible and the Book of Mormon are the inspired Word of God

**Freedom** – We value the freedom to operate the Church according to the Word of God, not according to the dictates of society

**Peace** – We believe that a time of peace, referred to as Zion or the Peaceful Reign, is in our future

**Wives** – We believe that marriage between a man and a woman is a holy institution

**Children** – We believe that children are born innocent in the sight of God and should be blessed (not baptized) and then raised to know the Lord such that they can eventually make their own decision to be baptized and serve God

We understand that each of these beliefs is disputed to some degree – some by other Christian people, some by non-Christians. Some of these beliefs are fully under attack today. Nonetheless, these are **our** standards. If we were to create our own title of liberty today, this is what would be written on it. Are we willing to raise up this standard or do we want to let others decide what we should believe?

Raise up the standard of The Church of Jesus Christ! Let’s stand together and do what needs to be done to build the kingdom of God.

***Second Verse of “The Standard of Liberty” from the Songs of Zion***

Strong soldiers needed to raise up the Standard,  
The Title of Liberty lift to the sword.  
Stand for your country, and stand for your fam’ly,  
But surely and foremost, son, stand for the Lord.



## Poison Control (Alma 47)

Alma 47 tells the story of a wicked and cunning man named Amalickiah who plots (successfully) to eventually become king of the Lamanites. The first part of his plot is to gain control of the Lamanite army. Having a smaller army already under his control, Amalickiah agrees to turn over his army to Lehonti, the Lamanite general, as long as Lehonti agrees to make Amalickiah the second in command of the entire army. The next step of this wicked man is obvious:

“Amalickiah caused that one of his servants should administer poison by degrees to Lehonti, that he died. Now, when Lehonti was dead, the Lamanites appointed Amalickiah to be their leader and their chief commander.” (Alma 47:18-19)

It is not mentioned what type of poison was used for this murder but clearly the people involved knew what they were doing as they administered the poison very carefully, little by little, until it had its desired effect.

There have been many types of poison in existence throughout time and many exist today. One medical website describes poison as follows:

*A poison is any substance that is harmful to your body. You might swallow it, inhale it, inject it, or absorb it through your skin. Any substance can be poisonous if too much is taken. The effects of poisoning range from short-term illness to brain damage, coma, and death. To prevent poisoning, it is important to use products appropriately. Keep dangerous products where children can't get to them. Treatment for poisoning depends on the type of poison. If you suspect someone has been poisoned, call your local poison control center right away.*

If you read the above with a spiritual mindset, you can easily see many spiritual parallels regarding things that may act as poison to our spiritual lives. Here's some general advice for spiritual poison control based on the above:

A poison is any person, place, thing or activity that is harmful to your soul. You can be exposed to it in many ways – visually, audibly, in person or via any electronic device.



Anything can be poisonous if it is overdone or if too high a priority is given to it in our lives. It may not be something that is bad in and of itself but if it takes our focus away from God and our spiritual lives, it can become poisonous.

The effects of poisoning can range from short-term inactivity to leaving the church or even denying the existence of God (whether in word or action). Poison is not something to fool around with.

To prevent poisoning, it is important to keep our priorities in order. Serving God must truly be #1 in our lives. Activities which take our focus away from God should be minimized. Sinful actions should be eliminated.

As much as possible, we need to protect our children from poisonous teachings. They are being exposed to spiritual poison in school and among their friends. We need to counter that with sound spiritual teaching and solid spiritual examples in our own lives.

Treatment for poisoning depends on the type of poison. Sometimes, you can just make a decision to put aside the source of the poison and it won't be a problem any longer. Other times, you may need assistance to recover – perhaps from your local ministry. Repentance may be required. There are too many different types of spiritual poison to list all of the possible treatments but do whatever is necessary to restore your spiritual life if it has been poisoned.

If you suspect someone has been poisoned, don't be afraid to alert your local ministry or someone else who can assist. Don't look at it as squealing on the person but rather as a loving attempt to help the person to recover.

With so much spiritual poison surrounding us in the world today, it's very possible that some of us will feel the effects of this poison from time to time. The enemy knows what he's doing and can administer this poison very carefully, little by little, until it has its desired effect. Let's not hesitate to take whatever poison control actions are necessary so we can maintain a healthy spiritual life.



## Strip the Enemy of His Power (Alma 48)

Alma 48 includes a fairly detailed description of the character of Moroni, the leader of the Nephite army. The description concludes with this powerful statement:

“If all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men” (Alma 48:17)

Since Moroni is held up as a model servant of God, it would certainly be wise to examine his traits more closely to see how we are or might be similar to him such that we can be part of the effort to strip the enemy of his power.

According to verses 11-16, Moroni was:

- **A man who was firm in the faith of Christ** – There are many different belief systems offered today. The enemy wants us to believe that all roads will lead to the same place and that faith in Jesus Christ is just one option. Let’s make sure that our faith is firmly and solely in the only begotten Son of God. Jesus Christ is so important to us that our church is named after Him and the gospel was restored such that we can worship in a manner closer to how Jesus taught rather than how men changed things later.
- **A man whose heart did swell with thanksgiving to his God** – Thanksgiving isn’t just the name of a holiday that we celebrate in November. It’s an attitude of recognizing that all good things in our life come from God and continually praising His name for all that He does for us. The enemy will tell you that you did these things yourself so there’s no need to thank God – you know better.
- **Faithful in keeping the commandments of God** – The enemy tells us that we’re free so don’t let anyone tell us what to do. In truth, he wants to be the one telling us what to do. Keeping the commandments of God – which are summarized by Jesus as “love God above all” and “love your neighbor as yourself” – allows us to take our direction from God (rather than the enemy) and live in harmony with our fellow man.

- **Resisting iniquity** – Sin can be made to look oh so attractive. You know how it goes – everybody does it, it's OK as long as you just do it a little bit, you're entitled to a little fun in life, etc. Giving in to iniquity gives the enemy power; resisting strips him of his power.
- **Taught never to give an offense** – Offenses between church members is the primary cause of people leaving the church. As Jesus says, "it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by who the offence cometh!" (Matthew 18:7). Let's try our best to not cause offenses and to not be offended easily. And when the offenses do inevitably come, be quick to resolve them – an offense that festers allows the enemy to gain power.
- **A man who did labor exceedingly for the welfare and safety of his people** – Let's not be the type of person who is only concerned about his own soul's salvation. Rather, let's do whatever we can to head off the enemy from attacking others too. Use the gifts and talents that God has given you to labor for the church and the spiritual and natural welfare of others.
- **A man of a perfect understanding** – Whenever the word "perfect" is used, most people say, "OK, that's out of my reach". That's what the enemy wants you to think such that you will give up in this area and instead focus only on increasing your worldly understanding. Although we may never reach a truly perfect understanding of the things of God in this life, we can try to increase our understanding by reading and studying the Word of God, attending church regularly and gaining valuable experience through all of the things described above. Don't underestimate what God can teach you if you open your mind to the things of God.

The enemy seems to be gaining power in the world today. However, we know he will eventually be defeated. A world full of Moroni-type people would render the enemy powerless today. We can't force others to be like Moroni but we can work on ourselves and we can also try to influence others who we come in contact with. At least within our own circle of influence, let's do our best to strip the enemy of his power now as we await the time of his ultimate defeat.



## The Scout Motto (Alma 49)

Had there been such a thing as “Boy Scouts” at the time Moroni lived, he would have been a great example of one. The Scout Oath sounds almost like the Title of Liberty:

"On my honor, I will do my best, to do my duty, to God and my country, and to obey the Scout Law, to help other people at all times, to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight"

Much of Alma 49 is dedicated to describing how the Lamanite armies are frustrated at every turn because the Nephite armies, under the direction of Moroni, have followed the Scout Motto of “Be Prepared”. Every Nephite city has had high piles of earth arranged all around it such that the Lamanites can only enter through the city entrance which is heavily guarded by a Nephite army:

“Thus they were prepared, yea, a body of their strongest men...to smite down all who should attempt to come into their place of security by the place of entrance; and thus they were prepared to defend themselves against the Lamanites” (Alma 49:20)

The definition of “prepare” is to make something ready beforehand or to plan in advance. It involves looking forward in time and making arrangements or doing things now such that something will be ready to go or be used at some future time. When the time actually arrives, it’s typically too late to think about being prepared – the time to prepare is beforehand.

Some examples where it is advisable to be prepared:

- Completing your education when you are young allows you to be prepared for a fruitful career in the workplace
- Saving money during your working career allows you to be prepared for retirement
- And, of course, committing your life to Christ (through repentance, baptism and enduring to the end) in this life allows you to be prepared for the life to come

Whereas there may be some occasions in life when you can jump in unprepared and everything can still turn out OK, inheriting your heavenly home is not one of those occasions. If you want to

dwell with God for all eternity, you must be prepared by the time you depart from this life. Since we don't necessarily know when that time will be, we should make sure we are prepared at all times (such as today). Don't wait until tomorrow – “behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

In the story above, if the Nephites had waited until the Lamanites were attacking to think about protecting their cities, they would have all been destroyed. If we wait until we've reached retirement age to think about putting aside money, we will never be able to retire. And, if we put off making a decision to serve the Lord until it is too late, our eternal home will not be in the kingdom of God.

In all things, but especially when it comes to serving God, let's live by the Scout Motto – “Be Prepared”!



## When the Game is Over, Everything Goes Back in the Box (Alma 50)

When I go in my basement, I see several shelves stacked with brightly colored boxes containing the “board games” from my younger days (and my children’s younger days). It seems that board games have gone out of style today but we have many fond memories of taking out the game boards and the various pieces and competing against one another to be the winner of the game. Here are some of the board games we played:

- **Monopoly** – The object of this game is to amass property, houses, hotels and money. If I am the winner of the game, I eventually own Boardwalk, Park Place and all of the property on the board as well as having lots of money. And then...everything goes back in the box.
- **Risk** – The object of this game is to conquer countries with your armies. If I am the winner of this game, it means my armies have taken over every country in the world such that I own the whole world! And then...everything goes back in the box.
- **The Game of Life** – In this game, sometimes you get married and sometimes you don’t. Sometimes you have children and sometimes you don’t. You could have a high-paying career (such as a doctor or lawyer) or perhaps earn a somewhat lower salary. At the end of the game, you can wind up at Millionaire Acres or in the Poor House. And then, regardless of how your journey has gone or how it has ended...everything goes back in the box.

The common theme of the above is obvious. Regardless of the game, regardless of how you play it, regardless of whether you win or lose – When the game is over, everything goes back in the box. You don’t get to keep any of the money you made or any of the countries you conquered – it all goes back in the box.

In Alma 50, the Nephites and Lamanites engage in something similar to the game of “Risk” described above (except for real, of course). Virtually all of their actions have to do with their “possessions” – either protecting their possessions or being in a position to add to their possessions. For example, the Nephites:

- “placed armies on the south, in the borders of their possessions” (verse 10)

- “did seek to cut off the strength and the power of the Lamanites from off the lands of their possessions, that they should have no power upon the lands of their possession” (verse 12)
- “began the foundation of a city...by the line of the possessions of the Lamanites” (verse 13)

This is by no means meant to be critical of the efforts of the Nephites to protect their lands and their people. Rather, in looking at how focused these people were on their possessions, it causes me to wonder how focused I am on my own possessions today.

**“For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out” (1 Timothy 6:7)**

For example, how much time/money am I willing to spend to add to my possessions? While there’s nothing wrong with having possessions (hey, I own all those board games), do I ever reach the point where I realize my possessions are enough? Or, should I devote every day of my life to trying to add to my possessions? When I am near death, will I look back and rue the missed opportunities to enjoy time with my loved ones and/or enjoy the possessions I had? I can’t take the possessions with me – when the game is over, everything goes back in the box.

**“For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36)**

And, even more critical, what spiritual price am I willing to pay to add to my possessions? Am I willing to be cruel and/or dishonest toward other people? Am I willing to sacrifice church time? Am I willing to sacrifice prayer time or time reading the scriptures? Basically, am I willing to compromise my relationship with God to have possessions in this life? Although people seem willing to make this choice every day, it doesn’t seem like a wise choice from the perspective of eternity.

Risking your eternal home to have more possessions in this life is like giving up your house to win a game of Monopoly. When the game is over and everything goes back in the box, how foolish would you feel to now be without a home and have nothing to show for it? How much worse to have no mansion in heaven when we reach the end of our lives and have nothing to show for it? The possessions that we worked so hard to amass won’t be coming with us – they’ll be going back in the box because the game is over.



## One Nation Under God (Alma 51)

During the period of time covered by the Book of Alma, the Nephite nation is intended to be “one nation under God”. Their system of government is one designed by Mosiah, a seer of God – it replaced the former system where kings ruled over the land. In Alma 51, the new system of government (only about 25 years old at this point) faces a severe challenge as the nation becomes severely divided, making it difficult to continue as one nation under God. This article presents an overview of this episode – see if you can spot any parallels to another nation that is intended to be one nation under God.

### **Change in Leadership of the Government**

At the end of Alma 50, the previous leader’s term expires (actually, he dies) and a man named Pahoran is “appointed chief judge and governor over the people, with an oath and sacred ordinance to judge righteously...and to grant unto them their sacred privileges to worship the Lord their God, yea, to support and maintain the cause of God all his days” (Alma 50:39).

### **A Portion of the People Want Change**

Alma 51 begins by saying “there were a part of the people who desired that a few particular points of the law should be altered” (verse 2). Are these proposed changes contrary to the precepts of God? It doesn’t say but based on what happens later, it’s not unreasonable to assume that they are. At the very least, it seems likely that the proposed changes will primarily benefit the people supporting them.

### **The Government Leader Refuses to Alter the System**

Choosing to keep things unchanged, “Pahoran would not alter nor suffer the law to be altered, therefore, he did not hearken to those who had sent in...their petitions concerning the altering of the law” (verse 3). Was he respectful of their feelings in turning them down? It doesn’t say. Did the people feel he was mean or even insulting in rejecting these attempted changes? Who knows? However, as long as he was fulfilling his oath to “support and maintain the cause of God” (maintaining the concept of “One Nation Under God”), he was doing the job he was appointed to do.



## **The People who want Change try to Remove the Leader from Office**

Incensed by Pahoran's refusal to accept their proposed changes, "those who were desirous that the law should be altered were angry with him, and desired that he should no longer be chief judge over the land" (verse 4). Backed by wealthy, powerful people of "high birth" (verse 8), they manage to force a national election on a referendum to eliminate the entire governmental system and go back to a system of kings. Much to their chagrin, they lose the election "and Pahoran retained the judgment-seat" (verse 7).

## **Divisiveness Ensues – Not "One Nation Under God"**

Right at this time, the Lamanites launch an attack against the Nephite nation. However, those Nephites who had opposed Pahoran "were so wroth with the chief judge, and also with [his supporters], that they would not take up arms to defend their country" (verse 13). In fact, when they "heard that the Lamanites were coming down to battle against them, they were (actually) glad in their hearts" (verse 13), preferring tragedy to come to the country rather than being willing to follow this leader and be part of one nation under God.

## **Destruction Comes – "One Nation Under God" is Restored**

When Moroni, the leader of the Nephite army, learns of this rebellion, "he [is] exceeding wroth because of the stubbornness of those people...his soul [is] filled with anger against them" (verse 14). There is no mention of tolerance, inclusion or compromise in his reaction – if these people are not willing to support one nation under God, they are the enemy.

Lest anyone try to criticize Moroni for his reaction, let's remember that the scriptures say that if all men had been like Moroni, "the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men" (Alma 48:17) – Moroni is an agent of God for this period of time.

This agent of God, with the approval of the government and a majority of the people, leads the army against these Nephite dissenters, killing 4000 of them and imprisoning others. The remainder of them are "brought down to humble themselves like unto their brethren, and to fight valiantly for their freedom" (verse 21) against the Lamanites. One nation under God is restored.

## **"One Nation Under God" Today**

The United States of America is intended to be "One Nation Under God" – American history and the Book of Mormon both support this concept. Yet, our recent history has many parallels to the story related above and we currently find ourselves in the "divisiveness phase". According to prophecy, destruction will be next – not necessarily in the manner described above but it will come from God with the purpose of destroying and/or humbling the wicked and ushering in a period of peace on this land which will then be one nation under God as He wants it to be.

In the meantime, let's do our best to support the "One Nation Under God" concept through supporting godly causes and leaders and opposing those who work against the precepts of God. Let's also make sure we are personally prepared to be counted among the people of God should the destruction come in our lifetime such that we will need not fear and we will be part of the kingdom of Zion on this land – a time of peace when we will truly be one nation under God.



## The Decoy Play (Alma 52)

You're watching a big football game. Time is running out and your team needs a big play. Your team's star pass receiver comes into the game. The huddle breaks and the star receiver lines up on the right side of the field. The quarterback calls the signals and glances over to his right several times. Everybody knows what's coming. The defense knows too and shifts some of their players over near the star receiver to make it harder for him to catch the pass that will be coming his way.

The ball is snapped. The quarterback takes a few steps back and watches the star receiver the entire time. He waits, waits and then turns and fires the ball on the left side of the field where another player – totally overlooked by the defense – is waiting to catch the winning touchdown pass. What happened? The defense was just a victim of the decoy play with one player being used as a decoy to take their focus away from where it really should have been, resulting in a big loss.

Moroni, the leader of the Nephite army, uses the decoy play in Alma 52. The Nephites want to retake the city of Mulek which is currently under occupation by the Lamanites and is heavily guarded by the Lamanite army. Moroni devises "a plan that he might decoy the Lamanites out of their strongholds" (verse 21).

A small portion of the Nephite army camps outside the city. When the Lamanites see this small army, they decide to attack so they send their army out of the city. The small Nephite army flees and the Lamanite army pursues them. The chase continues – further and further away from the city. Finally, the remainder of the Nephite army swoops in to capture the city which is no longer heavily guarded. The Lamanite army is surrounded and defeated, victims of the decoy play.

If you are serving God today, be aware that the decoy play is a favorite strategy of the enemy. Here are some examples of things that can potentially be used as decoys to lure us away from our intended course of serving God:

- **Political Causes** – It's very common today for people to become emotionally involved with various political causes. Unfortunately, when the cause is contrary to the Word of God, the response is often to question the validity of the scriptures. This is probably the biggest

challenge to churches today as faith in God's Word is being undermined by political causes of the day and people are being lured away from active service to God.

- **Jobs/Careers** – If we are in the workforce, we of course want to do the best we can in our jobs and have careers that are as successful as possible. However, be aware of the ease with which we can be enticed into channeling a disproportionate amount of our time, energy and focus into our careers at the expense of using those to serve God. A successful career can also breed a prideful attitude which can lure us off the path of being humble servants of God.
- **Girlfriend/Boyfriend/Spouse** – When choosing a companion of the opposite sex, we should make it an objective to be as “equally yoked” as possible. Pairing up with someone who does not share our beliefs in God creates a risky situation in which we will often be tempted to compromise our service to God. In extreme cases, ultimatums can even arise – leave the church or I'm leaving you. Don't let the desire for love in this life lure you away from serving God.

In Lehi's dream (in 1 Nephi 8), the people in the “great and spacious building” were used as a decoy to lure people off the straight and narrow path that led to the tree of life. As the people moved toward the building, they left the path and couldn't find their way back. Don't let that happen to you, whether with any of the potential decoys listed above or any other. Don't be a victim of the decoy play. Keep your focus where it should be – on serving God and continuing on the path that leads to His kingdom.



## Wrong for You but OK for Me (Alma 53)

In Alma 53, a group of men desire to enlist in the Nephite army but Helaman forbids them to do so, telling them they will lose their souls if they participate in the battle. But then another group of men steps forward to enlist and they are welcomed into the army and even blessed by God with miraculous protection.

How can this be? How can the same exact actions be wrong for some people and OK for others? Don't we all serve the same God?

The answer lies in understanding that although there are some actions that are equally wrong for all and some that are equally required for all, there are other actions that need to be viewed within the context of a person's own individual relationship with God.

For example, in the story above, the first group of men are the converted Lamanites – known as the people of Ammon (originally called Anti-Nephi-Lehies) – who were so repentant for killing people prior to their conversion that they made a promise to God that they would never again take up arms against other people. They even went as far as burying their weapons in the ground to seal their promise with God. Clearly, for these men to enlist in the army would mean they were breaking their promise to God.

On the other hand, the people of Ammon “had many sons, who had not entered into a covenant that they would not take their weapons of war to defend themselves against their enemies” (verse 16). Since these young men had not been involved in the same promise to God (they were children or not even born when the promise was made), it is perfectly OK for them to enlist in the army and God blesses them for doing so.

This same example applies to us today. If you make a promise to God that you will refrain from a certain activity, then it would clearly be sinful for you to engage in that activity. However, depending on the activity, it may not be sinful for me to engage in it.

For example, suppose you're obsessed with football – it's always on your mind, you follow the scores during church services, etc. Finally, you see that this obsession is interfering with your service to God so you promise God that you won't watch football anymore. For you, this is an admirable step to improve your personal relationship with God. However, should you now start

telling others that watching football is sinful? No, this is a case where something can be wrong for you but OK for me.

The same concept can apply in the opposite direction. For example, suppose God puts it on your heart that you need to focus on helping homeless people. This is obviously an admirable thing to do – an activity encouraged by the Word of God. However, should you now start telling your brothers and sisters in Christ that they are not serving God as they should be if they are not as focused on the homeless as you are? No, He placed it on your heart to do this so it would be wrong for you to not be fully engaged in that activity but it might be OK for me to not be as involved, especially if God has directed me to focus on some other activities. God gives different assignments to His various servants such that all of the work of God can be accomplished.

The point here is not that there is no standard of behavior that applies to all of us. Clearly there is – as defined by the Word of God. However, there are also many activities whose rightness or wrongness may well differ from one person to another, depending on each person's individual relationship with God.

When it comes to these types of things, let's not get caught up in judging each other. Instead, focus on your own service to God and what He wants you to be doing (or not doing), making sure that any "personalized direction" is consistent with the Word of God. And trust that your fellow servants of God are doing the same – even when their personalized direction differs from your own. A person's desire to please God and what's in their heart are what's important, not whether their behavior matches yours in every way. Remember that certain activities may well be required for you but not for me while other activities may be wrong for you but OK for me.



## What I Said – That’s It (Alma 54)

A few years back, I saw a movie which included an argument between a husband and wife. The husband had agreed to take time off from working and manage the household so his wife could accept a dream job she had always wanted. However, after seeing how difficult it is to deal with all of the issues involving their children and the house, and also seeing how far behind he is getting in his own work, he decides he needs to get out of this arrangement. When he sees that all of his persuasive arguments are not convincing his wife, he decides to just be assertive to win the argument. That part of the dialogue goes something like this:

Husband: This arrangement is not working. I’m going back to work – and that’s it.

Wife: No, actually that’s not “it”. I love my job and I’m not quitting. And THAT is it.

Husband: That’s not it. The thing I said – that’s it. What you said – not it. What I said – that’s it.

I’ve always remembered this dialogue because of the use of the phrases “that’s it” and “that’s not it” as a way of attempting to end the argument. In other words, my position is right because I said so. What I said – that’s it.

In Alma 54, Moroni writes a letter to the king of the Lamanites to arrange for an exchange of prisoners. In the letter, he describes the noble cause for which the Nephites are fighting and he urges the Lamanite king to end the war rather than to “pull down the wrath of that God whom you have rejected upon you” (verse 9).

In the response from the Lamanite king, he tells Moroni that he will be happy to end the war – just admit the Lamanite position is the correct one and “subject yourselves to be governed by [us]” (verse 18). “And concerning that God whom ye say we have rejected, behold, we know not such a being; neither do ye” (verse 21). In other words, “What you said – that’s not it. What I said – that’s it”. My position is correct because I said it is. The sooner that you realize that what I said is “it”, the sooner we can all get along.

When I read news stories today, the message is very similar to the Lamanite king’s message above. Whether the message comes from a politician, newscaster, TV/movie celebrity, sports star or even from the reporter writing the story, it comes across as “admit that our position (the ungodly position) is the correct one and subject yourselves to be governed by us”. And concerning that “God stuff”, we all know it’s a fairy tale – if you want to believe in it, that’s up to

you but don't try to subject the rest of to even hearing about it. The sooner you realize that what we're saying is "it", the sooner we can all get along.

As we are bombarded with messages like these – telling us what to believe, what to do, even what to think – let's remember that it's only God who deals in absolute truth and His Word is really "it". Messages from anybody else – regardless of how famous they are or how intelligent they may sound – are just expressions of their own beliefs and have no more validity than anybody else's. They're just using their influence to tell you, "What I said – that's it". Don't be fooled into believing it just because of who is saying it.

Hopefully, as servants of God, we are all doing our best to represent the Lord Jesus Christ and convince others that His message is the true message. However, as we do so, let's make sure we're not being swayed by the messages of the opposition into thinking that somehow "everybody" knows that this is "not it". Have faith in God and lean on His Word as the absolute truth. What others say is just talk and is most definitely not it.

And what about those who are so focused on turning God into a fairy tale and are able to convince others that serving God is actually offensive? The day will come when they will stand before God and He will say to them, "What you said – that's not it. What I said, THAT'S IT".





## Arming Everyone for the Battle (Alma 55)

In Alma 55, Moroni has a desire to free the Nephites who are held prisoner by the Lamanites in the city of Gid. The challenge he faces is that Gid is well fortified, with a wall surrounding the city and Lamanite guards keeping watch over the entrance to the city.

But Moroni has a plan. The guards are given strong wine and they become drunk and fall into a deep sleep. The Nephites then toss weapons over the wall of the city which are able to be distributed to the Nephite prisoners. Weapons are given to everyone, “even to their women, and all of their children, as many as were able to use a weapon of war” (verse 17).

When the Lamanites awaken the next morning, they have no choice but to surrender as all the Nephites – the prisoners inside the walls of the city and the Nephite army outside the city – are now armed and ready for battle. Arming everyone for the battle is the only strategy that could have worked – the Nephite army did not have the same access to the Lamanites that those “on the inside” did so everyone’s participation was needed to win this battle.

The spiritual parallels to this story are clear. In order to win the battle against today’s forces of evil, we need everyone – men, women and children – to be armed for the battle.

What does it mean to be armed for this battle? It doesn’t have anything to do with having a gun or a spear but rather it means being familiar with the Word of God, being willing to apply His principles in our lives and being willing to share His goodness with others.

Are we interested in being armed for the battle? Do we study the Word of God? Do we attend scripture studies? Do we bring our children to Sunday School?

As church leaders, are we doing our best to arm everyone? Do we have qualified teachers in place who can teach interesting and relevant lessons regarding the Word of God? Do our sermons teach and motivate people to live their lives for the Lord? Or are we just going through the motions and then wondering why our people are unarmed to fight the battle?

It’s never too early to start arming our people. For example, our children today are being taught as early as elementary school that there is no such thing as male and female, that there are more than two genders and a person can choose to be whatever gender they want to be. Yet, the Bible

says that God created people as male or female (Genesis 1:27). Do our young children understand this? If not, they are unarmed for what they will encounter and then we'll wonder why they're growing up believing things that are contrary to the Word of God.

Likewise, are we arming our teens (pre-teens?) with knowledge about God's intentions for sexual relations? Are we arming our adults of voting age with knowledge about God's intentions for our country rather than allowing them to get swept up in the current day political drama? We can't let our people face the world unarmed.

Every church meeting, every scripture study, every Sunday School is an opportunity to arm our people for the battle. Every meeting in which that does not happen is a missed opportunity. If we're among those who have the knowledge (the "weapons"), we need to do our best to arm everyone by sharing the knowledge with them.

And, once we are armed – whether we're a man, woman or child – we need to be willing and encouraged to jump into the battle. Personally, I've always been a big proponent of sending everyone into the battle. Over the years, programs such as Youth in Action, the Dominica 13-week program and the Gospel Blog have served as vehicles for church members of all ages and all genders (all 2 of them) to be armed and part of the battle for the souls of mankind.

In addition to organized programs, opportunities are available to each of us on a daily basis. And, in many occasions, you will actually be the person "on the inside" – the one who is in the best position to use your "weapons" for the battle. For example:

- There are lots of young people in school who might be willing to try attending church. A (somewhat) older guy like me can't invite them but if you're a young person in school, you can invite them – will you?
- You know a lot of people who might be affected by hearing your experiences of how God has blessed you. These are people who none of the rest of us know so only you can tell them about the goodness of God – will you?
- If somebody puts a God-supporting statement on their Facebook page and others start beating them up, will you be the one who jumps in to defend your Facebook friend?

With a relatively small army for Christ, we cannot afford to waste any resources. We need to be arming everyone for the battle such that all of our collective gifts and talents can be used by God to help accomplish His purposes. If you're one of the leaders of the army, provide arms for your troops. If you're a member of the church, arm yourself as best you can and join the battle. We need you!



## No Doubt (Alma 56)

A baseball player steps up to the plate and hits a long fly ball. The crowd comes to its feet in anticipation. The outfielder runs back to the wall and leaps and... Was it a home run? Was it an out? The outcome is very much in doubt until everyone sees whether the ball is in the outfielder's glove.

On the other hand, there are occasions when the batter hits the ball so high and so hard that everyone knows immediately that it's going over the fence. The crowd cheers immediately! This type of hit is known in baseball as a "no doubter".

"Doubt" is defined as a feeling of uncertainty. The more uncertainty, the more doubt. Any amount of uncertainty – even a very small amount – means that some doubt exists. The only way to have "no doubt" is to have absolute certainty – 100% certainty.

When it comes to believing in God, the goal is to have no doubt. When it comes to believing that Jesus Christ is the savior, the goal is to have no doubt. We will need to exercise faith at times to keep the doubts from creeping in but, as believers, we should be living our lives and making our decisions in life based on the certainty that God is who He says He is and that His promises can be relied upon – with no doubt.

When we pray, we should have no doubt that God is hearing the prayer and that "with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). Jesus said, "If ye have faith, and doubt not,...all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matthew 21:21-22). Of course, we understand that we should pray for that "which is right" (3 Nephi 18:20) and that we must consider the will of God in our prayers. However, the key point here is to recognize that our prayers have the potential to move mountains but any doubt we have will remove that potential.

In Alma 56, the 2000 young men known as "stripling soldiers" prepare for battle against the Lamanites. It is stated that "they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them" (verse 47). Their "no doubt" attitude is on display as they speak to Helaman who is to lead them into the battle, assuring him that "our God is with us, and he will not suffer that we should fall; then let us go forth" (verse 46).

Not only do these young men believe that God is with them – they take action based on that belief that would otherwise put their lives in jeopardy. Sure enough, the battle results in victory and not a single one of the 2000 stripling soldiers is killed. They were 100% certain God would be with them – they had no doubt – and He delivered them.

Let's not be the person who believes in God but lives life like He doesn't exist. God is alive, He loves us, He wants a relationship with us, He hears our prayers and He is with us always. Have no doubt!



## Serving God With Exactness (Alma 57)

Quite a bit is written in Alma 53-57 regarding the 2000 stripling soldiers led by Helaman. Their claim to fame was that they stepped in for their fathers – who were unable to join the army due to the oath they made to God – and helped defend their nation against the Lamanite army. The stripling soldiers fought in many battles and, though many were wounded, none of the 2000 were killed in battle.

In Alma 57, Helaman is recognizing this group for the great service they have provided. He makes one point in particular to explain their success:

“They did obey and observe to perform every word of command with exactness; yea, and even according to their faith it was done unto them” (Alma 57:21)

As their leader, Helaman appreciates that these young men follow his commands with exactness – not doing what is most convenient or ignoring commands they don’t want to follow or mixing in their own ideas which they may think could be a better way to go. By following the commands with exactness, the men show faith in their leader – that he knows what needs to be done – and also faith in God – that He knows what needs to be done. Their faith – as illustrated by serving with exactness – is rewarded by God as He protects them in the battles and gives them great success.

The scriptures contain many teachings and commands of Jesus Christ. As His servants – as His soldiers – we are expected to do our best to follow these commands with exactness. Among these commands are procedures known as “ordinances” (such as baptism, communion and feet washing) that are part of serving God. Jesus showed His disciples how to do these things; they taught others who taught others and so forth. Sadly, over time, the way the ordinances were performed began to change – perhaps some people found it inconvenient to do these things exactly as Jesus had done; some may have had “better ideas” about how to do them.

It took the restoration of the gospel in 1830 to restore the ordinances such that the members of The Church of Jesus Christ could once again be taught to do these things exactly as Jesus did them. For example, converts are baptized today the same way Jesus was and the same way converts in the early church were baptized – they are taken out into a natural body of water and immersed. The words said by the minister during a baptism are the exact words Jesus said to use

in 3 Nephi 11:25. Afterward, converts receive the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, exactly as taught in Acts 8:17. The procedure for bestowing the Holy Ghost is exactly what is described in Moroni 2 – the ministers first kneel in prayer and then receive the power to bestow the Holy Ghost.

The church ordinances are just one group of teachings from the scriptures that have been affected by inexact following. There are many other teachings that continue to be ignored or altered today as people choose to live their lives in ways that do not match up with the Word of God. Perhaps some teachings are viewed as inconvenient, perhaps some are seen as outdated, perhaps some are things they just don't want to do.

If it's my desire to serve God with exactness, I should ask myself:

- Can I serve God with exactness when it comes to my money?
- Can I serve God with exactness when it comes to marriage?
- Can I serve God with exactness in the way I treat other people?
- Can I serve God with exactness even at the risk of being persecuted by others as a result?
- Do I know what the scriptures say about all of the above?

Perhaps it would require perfection to follow all of the commands of God exactly. Even so, it's not an excuse to intentionally cut corners in serving God. Remember how miraculously God worked in the lives of the 2000 stripling soldiers who performed every word of command with exactness. Our lives can only be more blessed if we do our best to serve God with exactness.



## Strengthening Our Small Army (Alma 58)

In Alma 58, Helaman laments throughout the chapter about how small the Nephite army is. He describes their efforts in reaching out to the government for reinforcements and supplies but the response is limited. Finally, at their moment of greatest despair, they reach out to the greatest source of strength:

“Therefore we did pour out our souls in prayer to God, that he would strengthen us and deliver us out of the hands of our enemies...Yea, and it came to pass that the Lord our God did visit us with assurances that he would deliver us; yea, insomuch that he did speak peace to our souls, and did grant unto us great faith, and did cause us that we should hope for our deliverance in him” (Alma 58:10-11)

There are many examples in the scriptures of an exceedingly small number of people – even just one person at times – prevailing over overwhelming opposition due to receiving strength from God. Here are a few examples:

- Perhaps the most famous example is the battle between David and Goliath. As young David faced the large Philistine warrior, he bravely said, “Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts...this day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee...for the battle is the Lord’s” (1 Samuel 17:45-47). The strength of the Lord was sufficient for David to win the battle.
- The prophet Elijah took on 450 “prophets” of Baal in an effort to demonstrate which of them represented the true God. The 450 men prayed all day and nothing happened. When Elijah prayed, fire came down from the sky and consumed his sacrifice as well as the Baal sacrifice. Elijah obviously was not alone in this – he and God were more than a match for the 450 men. See 1 Kings 18:19-39 for the full account.
- In Judges 7, the army of Gideon numbered 32,000 men but God told Gideon the army was too large and needed to be reduced. After several iterations, the army was reduced all the way down to just 300 men. That tiny army went forth with the power of God and won the battle.

As a church, we may at times become discouraged when our numbers start to dwindle. We should of course do whatever we can to grow the church – both for the sake of offering salvation to all mankind as well as providing further strength for the army of God. However, let’s make sure we remember to access the greatest source of strength – petitioning God in prayer and depending on Him to provide His power as a demonstration to the world that He is with us. It may be necessary to do as the Nephites did and “pour out our souls in prayer to God” but if we want to reach the throne of God, we should be willing to dig deeper – even fasting and praying – in order to make that connection. As demonstrated in the examples above, God is more than able to win the battle with a very small number of people but He does need to be with us in order for that to happen.

Also, as individuals, we don’t need to feel alone if God is with us. Whatever we are facing in life, let’s again pour out our souls to God for strength to get through it. He will strengthen us as individuals and help us to win our own personal battles. We just need to make sure we are fighting the battle for Him and then He will strengthen our small army.





## Angry with the Government (Alma 59)

In Alma 59, Moroni sends a letter to the chief judge Pahoran, requesting reinforcements for their war against the Lamanites. The Nephite army is in need of additional soldiers as well as food and supplies so Moroni reaches out to the government to provide what is needed. However, as time passes, no assistance arrives. In later chapters, Moroni finds out what is happening from Pahoran's perspective and then he understands why no assistance has been provided. However, at this moment, he is out in the field with his army, fighting for the Nephite cause and hearing nothing from Pahoran. As a result, "Moroni was angry with the government, because of their [apparent] indifference concerning the freedom of their country" (verse 13).

In the United States at this time, it appears that just about everyone is angry with the government in one way or another. People who oppose the current president and what he stands for are angry with him and the government representatives who support him. People who support the position of the president are angry with the government representatives who oppose what he is trying to do. The anger has spilled over such that regular citizens who support one position are angry with citizens who support the opposite position. Yes, there's plenty of anger associated with the government today.

Perhaps there are some valid reasons to be angry with the government. Occasionally, policies are enacted that affect you in a negative manner, especially financially. It's only human to be upset when this happens.

However, in addition to our own individual circumstances, all of us who are servants of God should be dismayed to see many in our government leading the country away from God. Sinful conditions are not only being legalized but are also heralded as honorable and worthy of special protection from the government. Standing up for the teachings of Christ is not only unwanted but not permitted in many cases. People who are interviewed for certain government posts are asked about their Christian beliefs – if they respond that they support what Christ taught, they are eliminated from consideration. We've come a long way from a nation that was founded as a Christian nation. Yes, it's enough to make you somewhat angry with the government.

However, in spite of the above, let's be careful to not get too caught up in all the anger and political drama of today. Many personal relationships – between friends, family members, even

fellow servants of God – have been severed as a result of being on opposite sides of political positions.

Jesus said, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:44-45). If we’re going to be the children of our Father which is in heaven, it’s not too much of a stretch to extend this verse to include having love for people of the opposite political party – even if they don’t love us.

It doesn’t mean you’ll be friends with everyone – unfortunately, many are so caught up in their anger that they want nothing to do with you if you’re not with them and/or they belittle you for your beliefs such that a friendship doesn’t make sense. However, to the best of your ability, try to exhibit the love that Christ taught rather than allowing the anger of the day to influence how you treat others. Seek to understand the other person’s perspective – as happened with Moroni and Pahoran, this can often make a difference.

Regardless of the circumstances, the Lord expects us to be different and to allow the light of Christ to shine through us. Let’s not allow that light to be diminished, even if we do find ourselves angry with the government.



## **Neglect – When You Can & You Should but You Don’t (Alma 60)**

In Alma 60, the Nephite army still finds itself without reinforcements from the government such that their frustration is running high. Moroni sends another letter to the chief judge Pahoran – this one even more forceful than his previous letter – calling out the chief judge for his apparent neglect of the Nephite army. Here are a few passages from the letter:

- “Great has been the slaughter among our people...yea, great has been your neglect towards us” (verse 5)
- “Ye have neglected them insomuch that the blood of thousands shall come upon your heads for vengeance” (verse 10)
- “I fear exceedingly that the judgments of God will come upon this people, because of...the slothfulness of our government, and their exceeding great neglect towards their brethren” (verse 14)

The word “neglect” is used over and over to emphasize that the government has the resources to provide the army and that they should be supporting the army but yet, no assistance is being provided. They can help and they should help but they’re not helping.

(Moroni finds out in the next chapter that Pahoran is actually not in a position to help but he doesn’t know that now – thus his frustration and the accusation of neglect.)

Sometimes, when a person’s behavior is questioned, they may respond with a statement like “I’m not doing anything wrong”. Neglect is when not doing anything is wrong. It’s when action is required and no action is forthcoming. Lack of action in such cases typically results in some consequences – sometimes immediate, sometimes over time. For example:

- If you neglect your spouse, you won’t have a close relationship and may even wind up with a divorce
- If you neglect your children, you could lose custody of them; if you neglect the opportunity to instruct them, you lose the opportunity to influence the type of people they will grow up to be
- If you neglect your job, you may eventually be unemployed
- If you neglect your car’s upkeep, you may find yourself stranded when the car breaks down

- If you neglect your health, your health can deteriorate

In all of the above cases, there are things we can and should be doing (taking care of ourselves, providing for our families, going to work, etc.) – if we don't, it's neglect and we will eventually see the consequences.

The same concept applies to serving God. The Word of God outlines the actions that are required to be a servant of God – repentance, baptism, receive the Holy Ghost, endure to the end. These are things that anybody can do – all are invited to serve God – and they are things we should do according to the scriptures. Therefore, if we take no action, it's neglect and there may be consequences later.

Some may try to substitute other actions – “good works”, “loving everybody”, “being a good person”, etc. I would equate this to putting a nice air freshener in your car instead of getting your brakes fixed – it may make for a pleasant ride but when the end of the road is approaching, which action will make a difference and which will constitute neglect?

Even after giving our lives to the Lord, let's be careful to not let neglect creep in. In our human minds, we can easily justify:

- Neglect in attending church (I go as often as I can, nobody misses me when I'm not there)
- Neglect in donating (I can't afford it, why do they need my money?)
- Neglect in working for the Church (I go on Sunday – isn't that enough?)
- Neglect in standing up for the teachings of Christ (I don't want to lose friends)

Let's not question whether we can do things like the above in our service to God. Let's not question whether these are things we should be doing. In each case (and others), we know through the Holy Spirit that these are things we can do and we should do – at least to the best of our ability.

If we choose to do nothing, there may well be consequences over time – our closeness to God may be affected, our lives will not bear fruit, we won't help others find their way to Christ, etc. In some cases, we may eventually turn away from God altogether.

Jesus Christ came to earth to do something that He could do and needed to do to purchase our salvation. He didn't neglect that responsibility. Out of appreciation for that, let's not neglect any opportunities we have to take actions in our own lives to further the cause of Christ.

**“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (James 4:17)**



## Resist Evil and The Enemy Will Flee (Alma 61)

In Alma 61, Moroni finally receives a letter from the chief judge Pahoran, explaining why no supplies or reinforcements have been forthcoming for the Nephite army. He learns that continued in-fighting among the Nephites has resulted in Pahoran and his supporters being driven out of the city of Zarahemla and a king installed in place of the duly appointed government. As a result, Pahoran has no access to any supplies or reinforcements to assist the Nephite army.

In his letter, Pahoran stresses that since his exiled group represents the cause of God, they cannot give up but must do their best to resist the enemy and seek victory for the Lord:

“[God] doth not command us that we shall subject ourselves to our enemies, but that we should put our trust in him, and he will deliver us. Therefore...let us resist evil...that we may retain our freedom, that we may rejoice in the great privilege of our church, and in the cause of our Redeemer and our God” (Alma 61:13-14)

He concludes by asserting that putting up such a resistance will cause the enemy to flee such that the city of Zarahemla can once again be possessed by its rightful owners.

The spiritual battle for the souls of mankind continues today. At the Church level, we strive to cleave to the precepts of the Word of God, resisting the temptation to compromise on His teachings such that we would be trying to please people rather than trying to please God. As individual church members, we can help the Church by supporting the same precepts, resisting the onslaught of public opinion that demands that the teachings of the scriptures be abandoned.

In addition, we each have our own individual battles that we fight daily. The enemy comes after us in subtle ways to try to tempt us to cross the line here or there. If we do not resist these temptations, we can easily find ourselves too far over the line to make our way back. The example usually used for this is that if you have a string wrapped around you, that one string can easily be broken but if you allow multiple strings to be wrapped around you, they eventually form a strong rope that cannot be broken. Resist the temptation while it is a “string”. Don’t give in – call on the name of the Lord and, as the song goes, “In the name of Jesus Christ, the tempter has to flee”.

If pure evil appeared before us, most of us would know to resist it, rebuke it, flee from it. However, that's not typically how it appears. In the same letter from Pahoran referenced above, he describes how so many Nephites were drawn in by the enemy: "they have used great flattery, and they have led away the hearts of many people" (verse 4).

The enemy uses similar tactics today! Once upon a time, most people tended to accept the Word of God as the final word on how to live life. Today, people have been flattered into thinking that they themselves have the final word. "Be who you were meant to be", "Don't let anyone change you" are the mantras we hear today. The concept that accepting Christ and receiving the Holy Ghost is meant to change our lives is being attacked relentlessly by the enemy.

Resist this attack! Don't be taken in by the forces of evil that appeal to your human ego and try to portray the teachings of God as obsolete, irrelevant or even foolish for this "progressive" period of time. Instead of taking pride in who you are, take "pride" in who you and God together can be. Pray for the insight and strength to follow God's direction – He will provide it through the Holy Ghost. Grow in Christ and develop the spiritual strength you need to battle the enemy. Resist evil and the enemy will flee!

**"Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7)**



## Carrot, Egg or Coffee Bean? (Alma 62)

In Alma 62, Moroni and Pahoran take back the city of Zarahemla and the united Nephites then defeat the Lamanites in a war. At the end of the war, the writer reflects on how different people were affected in different ways by the war:

*“Many had become hardened, because of the exceeding great length of the war; and many were softened because of their afflictions, insomuch that they did humble themselves before God, even in the depth of humility” (Alma 62:41)*

Seeing how some people became hardened because of the war while others became softened by the same war reminds me of a story that I heard years ago. Here’s a version of that story:

*A young woman went to her mother and told her she was having a lot of problems in life. She was tired of fighting and struggling – she wanted to give up.*

*Her mother took her to the kitchen. She filled three pots with water. In the first, she placed carrots, in the second she placed eggs and in the last she placed ground coffee beans. She let them sit and boil for about twenty minutes.*

*She then told her daughter to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they got soft. She then asked her to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard-boiled egg. Finally, she asked her to sip the coffee. The daughter smiled, as she tasted its rich aroma.*

*Her mother explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity – boiling water – but each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak. The egg had been fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior. But, after sitting through the boiling water, its inside became hardened. The ground coffee beans were unique, however. After they were in the boiling water, they had changed the water.*

*“Which are you?” she asked her daughter. “When adversity comes, how do you respond? Are you a carrot, an egg, or a coffee bean?”*

The story ends by asking which of these we tend to be when adversity comes:

- The carrot that wilts and becomes soft and loses its strength
- The egg that develops a hardened heart
- Or the coffee bean that actually changes the hot water, the very circumstance that has brought about the pain

The above can be applied to how we react to adversity in all aspects of life – our place of employment, our marriage and even in the Church where the shortcomings of people may sometimes bring about disappointment, disillusionment and pain. We all face these same types of situations from time to time but, depending on how we react to the situation, the end result will be totally different.

- At our place of employment, depending on our reaction to adversity, the end result can range from (a) quitting our job to (b) hating our job to (c) doing our best to make it a better place to work.
- In our marriage, the result can range from (a) looking elsewhere for “happiness” to (b) constant fighting and eventual divorce to (c) committing ourselves completely to our spouse and making whatever adjustments we can to enjoy a blessed marriage.
- And, in the Church, the result can range from (a) becoming weak in the faith and less active in the Church to (b) becoming negative, cynical and critical to (c) allowing God to work through us to accomplish His work.

We all live in the same world and face the same types of challenges. Will you allow yourself to be beaten down by the world? Will you become heart-hearted and angry at the world? Or will you go forward in the strength of the Lord and change the world in whatever way you can?

The choice is up to you...

Will you be the Carrot, Egg or Coffee Bean?





## Enlarge My Coast (Alma 63)

Some years ago, there was a popular book called “The Prayer of Jabez” that focused on the short prayer recorded in 1 Chronicles 4:10:

*“And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested.”*

The book explores each of the four basic requests contained in the prayer – “Bless me indeed”, “Enlarge my coast”, “Be with me” and “Keep me from evil”. You can probably see how a nice lesson can easily be built around at least three of the four requests but it might not be as obvious what is meant by “enlarge my coast”.

The Hebrew word that was translated to “coast” in the above verse also means boundary, border or limit. For example, the eastern and western boundaries of the United States that border oceans are referred to as the east coast and the west coast.

Based on this definition, our personal “coast” would refer to our own personal boundaries or limits. If you’ve ever looked into self-help books or videos, you would recognize the call to push yourself beyond your current limits – grow, be all you can be, etc. There is nothing wrong with this – all too often, we remain inside artificial boundaries created by ourselves or others such that we do limit what we can accomplish in life.

However, from a spiritual perspective, enlarging my coast has to include allowing the gifts that God has blessed me with to bless other people too. One way of thinking about it is to say that you want your life to make a difference to others or that you want your span of influence to expand as wide as possible. This doesn’t have to be a prideful way of thinking – if you believe that God has blessed you with certain gifts, it’s only fitting that you would want those gifts to benefit as many people as possible.

So, consider your personal gifts from God – can any of them benefit other people? If so, pray that God gives you the opportunity to enlarge your coast in order to share these gifts with others. If you have a musical gift, seek opportunities to sing or play for as many people as possible. If you have a gift of spiritual knowledge, seek opportunities to teach and share that insight with others. If God has blessed your life in any way, seek opportunities to share your testimony with

as many people as possible. These are just some examples of how your personal gifts can bless others when you seek to enlarge your coast.

Alma 63 gives a brief account of a man named Hagoth who is “exceedingly curious” and seeks to enlarge his coast by building a large ship that carries many of the Nephites to a land beyond the borders of the land where the Nephite nation has been residing. When the first voyage is successful, Hagoth builds more ships that carry additional people away. The record indicates that “they were never heard of more. And we suppose that they were drowned in the depths of the sea” (verse 8).

Of course, just because the Nephites who boarded the ships were never seen again by those who remained behind doesn’t mean that they drowned. In fact, it is believed by some that it was these travelers who populated the islands off the coast of the Americas and are the ancestors of the native people who reside there today. If that is true, then the actions of Hagoth to enlarge his personal coast resulted in the enlarging of the coast of the entire Nephite nation.

Likewise, your efforts to enlarge your personal coast will not only multiply the value that God has placed within you but it can also help enlarge the coast of The Church of Jesus Christ. And that is something that benefits us all.