

Book of Mormon 3
The Vision of the Tree of Life
(1 Nephi 8-11; 12:16-18; 15)

(Here is inspirational background)

I. Lehi's Vision of the Tree of Life provides guidance for us in our times.

A. The great and spacious building is meaningful today.

1. Note it is described as being "in the air." It is fascinating to discover some important buildings of Lehi's time, like the Citadel in Jerusalem, had no windows in their first floors, in order to thwart thieves. This idea was borrowed from a famous building in Yemen. The result was that at night, when the lights on the top floors were lit, the building appeared to float in the air.

2. While a real representation, the great and spacious building floating in the air can also signify one with **no foundation**, which would eventually fall.

a. For several years I lived in a condominium in San Francisco. I felt uncomfortable knowing that all we owned was a piece of the sky, with no immediate foundation. In 1989 there was an earthquake. Fortunately our building itself was built upon rock, so we experienced little shaking and no damage. In fact because the shaking in our condo was so minimal I was shocked to see what had happened in other parts of the city, where floor after floor had collapsed upon each other.

I recognized, though, that if the earthquake had been stronger, we too could have experienced damage. While living there, being "ungrounded" left me with some unease. When we moved away and into a regular house, I was comforted knowing that if something happened to the house itself, I would still have the earth beneath it, and a good foundation upon which to live temporarily and on which to later rebuild.

3. Thus I have strong feeling for our hymn "How Firm a Foundation."

It is inspiring to read every verse of this hymn, noting its words originally come from Isaiah 41:10, 43:2-5 and Helaman 5:12. The hymn reminds that the Church is based on a firm foundation of Revelation through Jesus Christ, and that we as individual members can endure every trial of the deceiver with strong faith.

4. The mockers in Lehi's Vision are a particularly powerful symbol because we see so much mockery of our faith today. Realizing that **this is the lot of those who truly seek God's fullest blessings helps me understand why the Church and its members must endure it.**

a. We should therefore make certain that *we never* be guilty of mockery. Mockery can cause others to lose testimonies, interest in the church, and feel bitterness toward the Church, if we mock anyone for any reason.

II. The Tree of Life has powerful symbolism which can be fully understood.

A. **The earliest Christians believed *Christ upon the cross was the ultimate fulfillment of the Tree of Life.***

1. There is much evidence of this truth, beginning with the *scripture* where Peter himself described Christ as bearing "... our sins in his own body **on the tree...**" (1 Peter 2:24).

2. This symbolism was very pervasive. One writer says it was “the subject most frequently found symbolized on early Christian sepulchral tablets and monuments... even on the rudest of them, showing how universal was this sentiment.” (H.C. Barlow, *Essays on Symbolism*, (London: Williams and Norgate, 1866), 74.

3. This understanding also appeared very early. One writer says the connection between cross and Tree of Life originated in the earliest stages of Christianity, before it was spread to the Greeks and Romans. (Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life, Image for the Cosmos*, (Avon Publishers of Bard, Camelot, Discus, Equinox and Flare Books, 1974), 121.

4. One early Christian painting portrays the Tree of Life on one side as Genesis represents it --- as barred from man by cherubim and flaming swords --- and contrasts it on the other side with the cross as its antitype, open and welcoming (Barlow, p. 72). The witness is that while man was once denied tasting of the fruit which could cause him to live forever (but in his sins and thus denied greater blessings), now, through Jesus the Christ, the fruit of Eternal Life is offered freely to all who will partake. For Christ in the meantime paid the price for sin, and through his atonement and man’s repentance, man could now hope to live forever, but in a state of purity.

5. The Book of Mormon supports the relationship between the Savior on the cross and the Tree of Life. When Nephi asked for the meaning of that tree, he was shown a series of visions relating to Christ, **including His being lifted up on the cross for the sins of the world** (1 Nephi 11:33). Nephi’s vision interprets the meaning of the tree as “the love of God;” **but God’s love was most powerfully fulfilled in the sacrifice of His Son.**

6. Some Latter-day Saints may feel uncomfortable about a connection between the cross and the Tree of Life, as our churches do not use the cross in or on our chapels. But we cannot ignore Jesus’ death on the cross was a vital part of His atonement. The lack of its usage can be understood by a warning given in Judges (Judges 8:27), where God’s people are condemned for **worshipping a symbol**. Symbols are given to us by God to *teach* us truths. But symbols become dangerous when we begin to worship them. Therefore there is wisdom in not adorning our churches with crosses, in spite of the fact that Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross was the fulfillment of the Tree of Life.

7. The wisdom of using the resurrected Christ as a teaching tool, such as in visitor’s centers and not a place or worship, was pointed out by Richard Eyre. While a missionary he served at the Mormon Pavilion in the New York World’s Fair. One evening he noticed a priest, who had come over from the Catholic display, standing in front of the Christus, and weeping. When asked if he were alright, the priest replied “...it’s just that I was thinking... we have the dead Christ, and you have the risen Lord” (Deseret News January 5, 2012).

B. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has verified that the Tree of Life is fulfilled by Christ on the cross as a part of His *atonement*.

1. A significant part of the vision is when Lehi, finding such joy in the fruit from the Tree, invites his family to “come and partake” (1 Ne. 8:15-18).

2. I find spiritual blessing in thinking of this invitation as I *literally* partake of the sacrament. **For here are the symbols of Christ’s flesh and blood --- the fruit He offers mankind from the Tree of Life.** It makes partaking of the sacrament more spiritually

joyous, knowing that in truth I have heeded Christ's offer to "come and partake" of the fruit of the Tree of Life --- His atoning sacrifice.

III. One of Nephi's great virtues was that he sought to verify truth for himself.

A. Nephi began with a great **desire** to see his father's vision.

1. He wanted to know for the right reasons.

2. He felt the power of the Holy Ghost as Lehi spoke, therefore: "I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things by the power of the Holy Ghost...For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost..." (1 Nephi 10:17, 19).

B. Because of righteous desire, he was shown Lehi's vision, and was promised he would see even more of the mysteries of life. In fact, **he was also shown the future of his people, great events in the Promised Land, the Restoration, and the re-gathering of Israel.**

C. Nephi continues to show how *we* can obtain greater knowledge through the Holy Ghost.

"... I had **desired to** know the things that my father had seen, **and believing** that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I **sat pondering in mine heart** (1 Nephi 11:1)." Note:

1. Nephi desired to know for himself

2. He believed that the Lord was able to make them known unto him

3. He studied/pondered in his heart what Lehi had seen.....

Because of these three steps, he was blessed to receive his own vision of the Tree of Life.

D. Elder Robert E. Hales spoke at Arnold Frieberg's funeral and related that Brother Frieberg "saw" images in his mind that he then painted to the best of his ability. Elder Hales related that one of the things Frieberg desired to see was the vision of the Tree of Life, so that he could paint what Lehi and Nephi actually saw.

Note that first Brother Frieberg had the **desire**.

Frieberg also **believed!** Elder Hales pointed out that Frieberg's feelings were that, after all, Lehi had seen this vision, Nephi had seen it, and so he believed he could see it for himself.

However, he did not just *desire* to do so, he **worked in faith to obtain this blessing**. Frieberg fasted for six to seven days, [A limited fast, partaking of juices and water only].

The result was that Frieberg did see Lehi's vision for himself and made sketches of it, though he was never able to complete it. His sketches of the Tree of Life were found among his unfinished paintings after his death. His vision was significantly different than other representations of it. Frieberg told Alan Knight, a friend who conducted his funeral, the most significant part of the dream was the iron rod, and its representation of the need to daily struggle to hold onto the word of God and to help others find it and hold on to it.

IV. There are many things to learn from Lehi's vision, from the symbols in the dream themselves. But we should also learn we can and should seek to know truth for ourselves.

A. Like Nephi, our desire to "know for ourselves" will not only help us verify the truth of the things the prophets teach us, **but can lead us to new levels of understanding of other truths the Lord would like to teach us, as in the case of Nephi.**