

BOOK OF MORMON LESSON 11
**“PRESS FORWARD WITH A
STEADFASTNESS IN CHRIST”**

2 Nephi 31-33
by Ted L. Gibbons

QUOTE OF THE WEEK: Speaking of the Book of Mormon, Elder Spencer W. Kimball said:

May I tell you of a great adventure? As I traveled to a weekend assignment. I took with me an unusual book which was my constant companion. I could lay it down only to sleep, eat, and change trains. It fascinated me, captivated me, and held me spellbound with its irresistible charm and engaging interest. I have read it many times.

As I finished it, I closed the book and sat back, absorbed as I relived its contents. Its pages held me, bound me, and my eyes were riveted to them. I knew the book was factual, but as has been said, "Truth is stranger than fiction."

I am constrained to speak to you of it today. It is a story of courage, faith, and fortitude, of perseverance, sacrifice, and super-human accomplishments, of intrigue, of revenge, of disaster, of war murder, and rapine, of idolatry, and of cannibalism, of miracles, visions, and manifestations, of prophecies and their fulfillment.

I found in it life at its best and at its worst, in ever-changing patterns. I hardly recovered from one great crisis until another engulfed me.

Across the stage of this drama of life through the ages, marched actors in exotic, colorful costumes from the blood-painted nudity of the warrior to the lavish, ornamented pageantry of royal courts -- some actors loathsome and degraded, others so near perfection that they conversed with angels and with God. There are the sowers and reapers, the artisans, the engineers, the

traders, and the toilers, the rake in his debauchery, the alcoholic with his liquor, the pervert rotting in his sex, the warrior in his armor, the missionary on his knees.

This dramatic story is one of the greatest ever played by man (Spencer W. Kimball, Conference Report, April 1963, p.63).

INTRODUCTION: In an article in the *Daily Herald* of Provo, Utah, on February 8, 2003, Richard N. Ostling reviewed the newest edition of the *Encyclopedia of American Religion* by J. Gordon Melton. There are 2,630 U.S. and Canadian churches faith groups described in the new edition.

In his article, Ostling observes:

There's a denomination for practically everyone.

If the Episcopal Church won't do, worshippers can move leftward into the Metaphysical Episcopal Church or Free Episcopal Church, or rightward into dozens of breakaways like the Anglican Mission in America.

Does Unitarianism seem too conventional? The denomination offers a subgroup of Unitarian Universalist Pagans.

Moving further from the mainstream, there's always the Church of God Anonymous, the Nudist Christian Church of the Blessed Virgin Jesus or the Only Fair Religion (pp. C-1, C-2).

The list continues, with religious doctrines as varied as the inclinations of the flock of religious practitioners in North America. In contrast to this startling and occasionally amusing description of doctrinal diversity, Nephi in his closing chapters offers us an unadorned view of the doctrine of Christ.

And now, behold, my beloved brethren, this is the way; and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God. And now, behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God, without end. Amen (2 Nephi 31:21).

1. NEPHI TEACHES THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST.

Nephi promises to present the doctrine of Christ in simplicity:

I shall speak unto you plainly, according to the plainness of my prophesying. For my soul delighteth in plainness; for after this manner doth the Lord God work among the children of men. For the Lord God giveth light unto the understanding; for he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding (2 Nephi 31:2 - 3).

This chapter teaches fundamental principles and ordinances of the gospel. The doctrine is more than an enlargement of the 4th Article of Faith; it teaches that doctrine, but also shows us much more.

HAVE FAITH

The word *faith* is only found once in 2 Nephi 31, in verse 19. Nephi tells us there that we can only pass worthily through the portal of the narrow gate, and enter it the strait path (31:9), and that we can only make the covenant of baptism and receive the cleansing fire of the Holy Ghost if we have “unshaken faith in [Christ]” (2 Nephi 31:19). But this chapter contains another word, a related word, that feels to me like a useful description of faith. The word is *follow*, and it appears in verses 10, 12, 13 and 16. Part of our having faith in Christ must be a willingness to follow him, with unshaken faith, wherever he determines to take us.

We are counseled to follow him by keeping the commandments (vs. 10), and by doing the things he has done (vs. 12). We are instructed to follow him with “full purpose of heart,” without hypocrisy and deception, but with “real intent” (vs. 13). We are commanded to follow him into the waters of baptism (vs. 13), and to endure to the end in following his example (vs. 16). These are things that faithful people do.

REPENTANT OF SINNING

And the Father said: Repent ye, repent ye, and be baptized in

the name of my Beloved Son (2 Nephi 31:11).

We are told that we can only receive the Holy Ghost after we have repented of our sins and been baptized (31:13, 14). Speaking again of that narrow gate, Nephi says,

For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water; and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost (2 Nephi 31:17).

As I have searched the scriptures and reflected on this matter of repentance, I have begun to think that I may have rendered a disservice to some of my students in the way I have taught this principle. I have spent a number of class periods explaining the steps of repentance and laboring like a bulldog over a beefsteak to convince listeners that they must go through *every* step and repent of *all* their sins to have a hope of salvation. One day a student asked a simple question that caused me to begin the study and reflection I mentioned above. She said, “What if you can’t remember all your sins?”

I’m pretty sure I can’t. Surely in those dark days of adolescence I did a few thousand stupid, wrong things that I can no longer remember. The ones I can remember convince me there must have been others. They must have been sins, needing the cleansing power of the atonement after appropriate repentance. But can I repent of a sin I cannot describe or remember? How can I recognize such sins? How can I make restitution? I believe the scriptures allow for just such repentance.

The great challenge is more than the requirement to repent of our sins. It is the requirement to repent of sinning. Or, if that seems impossible, perhaps it is the requirement to repent of wanting to sin. Many years ago I had a seminary student, a young lady, come to me four times in one year with heart-rending confessions of immoral activity. In each case I tried to counsel her and then sent her on to her bishop. I have often reflected since then on the depth of her sorrow—it seemed like godly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:10)—but this lovely, remorseful girl only confessed; she did not forsake. It seemed then

and seems now that for her and all of us a time must come when we stop repenting of sinful activities and instead stop sinning.

I love the phrase employed by Lamoni's father in his appeal for the cleansing power of the atonement in his life. He said in his prayer to the Father, "I will give away all my sins to know thee . . ." (Alma 22:18). The Nephites who listened to Benjamin's sermon cried out,

O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who created heaven and earth, and all things; who shall come down among the children of men. And it came to pass that after they had spoken these words the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ who should come, according to the words which king Benjamin had spoken unto them (Mosiah 4:2-3).

Alma's prayer for forgiveness was brief and powerful (he said he had repented "nigh unto death" [Mosiah 27:28]).

O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.

And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more (Alma 36:18-19).

There are other examples in the scriptures. Perhaps these will do. They also suggest a lesson about the steps of repentance. All of them are essential, but the timing is not set in stone. In all of the examples mentioned above, some of the steps of repentance must have followed forgiveness. The restructured lifestyle of Lamoni's father and the Anti-Nephi-Lehies; the covenant and conformity of the people of Benjamin; the efforts of Alma and

his friends to repair the damage they had done (Mosiah 27:35) . . . all of these followed forgiveness and came because they had repented of their inclination to be sinners, not simply of their sins.

BE BAPTIZED

Nephi gives us in 2 Nephi 31 what I believe to be the greatest scriptural discourse on baptism. After reminding us of the baptism of Christ, Nephi declares,

And now, if the Lamb of God, he being holy, should have need to be baptized by water, to fulfil all righteousness, O then, how much more need have we, being unholy, to be baptized, yea, even by water! (2 Nephi 31:5).

In his explanation of our need for this immersion, he makes a powerful observation about the meaning of this ordinance. He says,

Know ye not that he was holy? But notwithstanding he being holy, he showeth unto the children of men that, according to the flesh he humbleth himself before the Father, and witnesseth unto the Father that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments (2 Nephi 31:7).

By his baptism Jesus showed us that he was humble enough, *in the flesh* and before to the Father to witness that he would be *obedient* and keep his commandments, including the commandment of baptism. Plug that principle into your own life. What does your baptism signify? Nephi seems to be teaching that baptism, in simplest terms, means that we will be *obedient in the flesh*—that we will do with our mortal bodies and our mortal lives whatever the Father asks us to do.

Thus Jesus, at the commencement of his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, prayed to the Father: “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me . . .”

He began to be “sore amazed and very heavy” (Mark 14:33), and told his disciples, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here, and watch” (Mark 14:34). In the increasing agony of those moments, with the growing awareness of how awful a burden he was about to shoulder, he appealed to the Father to find another way. But then, in a divine demonstration of what “flesh obedience” really means, he continued, with these words: “nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matthew 26:39). *Father, I don’t want to do this, Nevertheless, if you need me to, I will.*

We who have been baptized need to use the word *Nevertheless* more than we do. *Father, I really do not want to be the WEBLOS advisor. 11-year-olds make me crazy. Nevertheless, if you want me to, I will. Or, Lord, I really don’t want to give up two years of my life to teach the gospel in Mongolia. Nevertheless, if you ask me to, I will. Or, Lord, I think it will be so hard to keep myself morally clean so I can find a worthy companion and enter the temple. Nevertheless . . .*

RECEIVE THE HOLY GHOST

When we have complied with the requirements of faith, repentance, and baptism,

then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost; and then can ye speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel (2 Nephi 31:13-14).

Of this matter of receiving the Holy Ghost, Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr. said,

However, it is my judgment that there are many members of this Church who have been baptized for the remission of their sins, and who have had hands laid upon their heads for the gift of the Holy Ghost, but who have never received that gift—that is, the manifestations of it. Why? Because they have never put themselves in order to receive these manifestations. They have never humbled themselves. They have never taken the steps that would prepare them for the companionship of the Holy Ghost. Therefore, they go through life without that knowledge;

they are lacking in understanding. When those who are cunning and crafty in their deceit come to them criticizing the authorities of the Church and the doctrines of the Church, these weak members do not have understanding enough, information enough, and enough of the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord to resist false doctrines and teachings. They listen and think that perhaps they have made a mistake, and the first thing you know they find their way out of the Church, because they do not have understanding (Joseph Fielding Smith, "Seek Ye Earnestly the Best Gifts," *Ensign*, June 1972, 3).

2. NEPHI SAID THAT WE MUST PRESS FORWARD AND ENDURE TO THE END

Nephi adds one principle to these familiar ones, a principle to round out the basis for a faithful and religious life and pave the way for our return to our Father.

When we have passed through the gate and entered the path, we must *stay on the path*. When we have received the gift of the Holy Ghost, we must follow the promptings of the Holy Ghost. Nephi describes this as enduring to the end. He also describes it as *pressing forward*.

Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life (2 Nephi 31:20).

Getting on the path is imperative, but it doesn't count for much if we do not stay on the path. Ezekiel said,

But when the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, *and* doeth according to all the abominations that the wicked *man* doeth, shall he live? All his righteousness that he hath done shall not be mentioned: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath

sinned, in them shall he die (Ezekiel 18:24).

In other places in the Standard Works, the Lord speaks of this enduring with other language. In D&C 122:9, the Lord described some of the awful experiences that might come to Joseph, but then said, “Therefore, hold on thy way.” In D&C 6:13 and Mosiah 2:14, disciples are encouraged to “hold out faithful to the end.”

3. NEPHI SPEAKS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF FEASTING ON THE WORDS OF CHRIST.

Does Nephi seem a little frustrated in the first couple of verses of 2Nephi 32? He has just given what must be the clearest discourse on the Doctrine of Christ in the scriptures, and then, (looking, we suppose through the lens of prophecy and revelation at our day), he realizes that we still don't understand well enough.

AND now, behold, my beloved brethren, I suppose that ye ponder somewhat in your hearts concerning that which ye should do after ye have entered in by the way. But, behold, why do ye ponder these things in your hearts? (2 Nephi 32:1).

Verse 7 seems to be a continuation of this same lament:

And now I, Nephi, cannot say more; the Spirit stoppeth mine utterance, and I am left to mourn because of the unbelief, and the wickedness, and the ignorance, and the stiffneckedness of men; for they will not search knowledge, nor understand great knowledge, when it is given unto them in plainness, even as plain as word can be (2 Nephi 32:7).

In this chapter, Nephi will suggest three things that will enable us to know what we should do in every circumstance. Here they are:

- A. “Wherefore, I said unto you, feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:3).

In our search for direction in our lives, we need to feast on the words of Christ. The reason is pretty clear: “the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do.”

If you had to select an eating verb to describe your relationship with the scriptures, what verb would you pick? Would it be *feast*? How about *dinner*? *Snack*? *Nibble*? *Anorexia*?

Boyd K. Packer spoke of the power of the words of Christ to tell us the answer to all of our problems:

If [you] are acquainted with the revelations, there is no question--personal or social or political or occupational—that need go unanswered. Therein is contained the fullness of the everlasting gospel. Therein we find principles of truth that will resolve every confusion and every problem and every dilemma that will face the human family or any individual in it (*Charge to Religious Educators*, p.21).

- B. For behold, again I say unto you that if ye will enter in by the way, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do (2 Nephi 32:5).

The verb in verse 3 is *tell*. The verb in verse 5 is *show*. The promise is identical: *all things*. The words of Christ will tell us and the Holy Spirit will show us all things that we ought to do.

Brigham Young thought we ought to do better at following the direction of the Spirit:

There is no doubt, if a person lives according to the revelations given to God's people, he may have the Spirit of the Lord to signify to him his will, and to guide and to direct him in the discharge of his duties, in his temporal as well as his spiritual exercises. I am satisfied, however, that in this respect, we live far beneath our privileges." (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. and arr. by John A. Widtsoe, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1973, p. 32; emphasis added.)

- C. And now, my beloved brethren, I perceive that ye ponder still in your hearts; and it grieveth me that I must speak concerning this thing. For if ye would hearken unto the Spirit which teacheth a man to pray ye would know that ye must pray; for the evil spirit teacheth not a man to pray, but teacheth him that he must not pray. But behold, I say unto you that ye must pray always, and not faint; that ye must not perform any thing unto the Lord save in the first place ye shall pray unto the Father in the name of Christ, that he will consecrate thy performance unto thee, that thy performance may be for the welfare of thy soul (2 Nephi 32:8 - 9).

The third and final principle is prayer. We can pray for revelation and direction and for the inspiration to understand the scriptures and the courage to follow the promptings of the Holy Ghost. We can pray for direction in the challenges that confront us.

NEPHI DECLARES THAT THE PEOPLE WILL BELIEVE HIS WORDS IF THEY BELIEVE IN CHRIST.

Nephi seems to have a clear understanding of the response his writings will receive in the last days. 2 Nephi 29 was a warning to skeptical Gentiles. 2 Nephi 33 is a continuation of that theme.

But behold, there are many that harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit, that it hath no place in them; wherefore, they cast many things away which are written and esteem them as things of naught (2 Nephi 33:2).

Is it possible that those who read this book and feel nothing are *resisting* the Holy Spirit? The Lord told Joseph Smith

And the whole world lieth in sin, and groaneth under darkness and under the bondage of sin. And by this you may know they are under the bondage of sin, because they come not unto me. For whoso cometh not unto me is under the bondage of sin. And whoso receiveth not my voice is not acquainted with my voice, and is not of me (D&C 84:49-52).

That message is pretty clear. Those who don't receive to his voice are not acquainted with his voice. The truth is that "every one that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit cometh unto God, even the Father" (D&C 64:47).

And Nephi speaks of those who do not hear the voice of Christ in the words of the Book of Mormon.

And now, my beloved brethren, and also Jew, and all ye ends of the earth, hearken unto these words and believe in Christ; and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ. And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; and they teach all men that they should do good. And if they are not the words of Christ, judge ye—for Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness (2 Nephi 33:10-11).

If we believe in Christ and if we are familiar with the voice of Christ, we will know that these words are his words. If we do not know that—if any who read do not—it is not a fault in the language or the authors or the translator. It is a fault in the reader. And one day, standing before the bar of God, all those who have received this book will know it.

CONCLUSION:

Have you ever wondered how you would have responded to the messages of this book if someone had handed it to you in upstate New York in 1831? Have you wondered how you would have responded to the mission of Christ if you had been living in Galilee in 30 AD? If the message of 2 Nephi 33 is true, and it is, then you would have responded just as you have responded in your own life.

Who will believe our words, and who will hear our message?
Who will honor the name of Joseph Smith and accept the gospel restored through his instrumentality?

We answer: the same people who would have believed the words of the Lord Jesus and the ancient Apostles and prophets had they lived in their day.

If you believe the words of Joseph Smith, you would have believed what Jesus and the ancients said.

If you reject Joseph Smith and his message, you would have rejected Peter and Paul and their message.

If you accept the prophets whom the Lord sends in your day, you also accept that Lord who sent them.

If you reject the restored gospel and find fault with the plan of salvation taught by those whom God hath sent in these last days, you would have rejected those same teachings as they fell from the lips of the prophets and Apostles of old (Bruce R. McConkie, "Who Hath Believed Our Report?" *Ensign*, Nov. 1981, 48)

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