

BM Lesson #13

THE ALLEGORY OF THE OLIVE TREE

Jacob 5-7

by Ted L. Gibbons

QUOTE OF THE WEEK: There is not that being that ever had the privilege of hearing the way of life and salvation set before him as it is written in the New Testament, and in the Book of Mormon, and in the book of Doctrine and Covenants, by a Latter-day Saint, that can say that Jesus lives, that his Gospel is true, and at the same time say that Joseph Smith was not a Prophet of God. That is strong testimony, but it is hue. No man can say that this book (laying his hand on the Bible) is true, is the word of the Lord, is the way, is the guide-board in the path, and a charter by which we may learn the will of God; and at the same time say, that the Book of Mormon is untrue; if he has had the privilege of reading it, or of hearing it read, and learning its doctrines. There is not that person on the face of the earth who has had the privilege of learning the Gospel of Jesus Christ from these two books, that can say that one is true, and the other is false. No Latter-day Saint, no man or woman, can say the Book of Mormon is true, and at the same time say that the Bible is untrue. If one be true, both are; and if one be false, both are false. If Jesus lives, and is the Savior of the world, Joseph Smith is a Prophet of God, and lives in the bosom of his father Abraham. Though they have killed his body, yet he lives and beholds the face of his Father in Heaven; and his garments are pure as the angels that surround the throne of God; and no man on the earth can say that Jesus lives, and deny, at the same time, my assertion about the Prophet Joseph. This is my testimony, and it is strong. (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, p.459)

INTRODUCTION: Jacob's recital of the allegory of the olive tree is the longest, and probably the most complex chapter in the Book of Mormon. But it is a marvelous exposition of a point Jacob wants desperately to make.

Jacob told us at the end of Jacob 4 that the

Jews were a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets, and sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them, and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand, because they desired it. And

because they desired it God hath done it, that they may stumble. (Jacob 4:14)

He also told us that they would “reject the stone upon which they might build and have safe foundation.” (4:15)

But even so, he assures us, that stone—the Savior Jesus Christ— would “become the great, and the last, and the only sure foundation, upon which the Jews can build.” (4:15)

After having a careful look at this sequence of conclusions, one is bound to ask, “How can a people be stiffnecked, kill the prophets, despise words of plainness, look beyond the mark, desire things they cannot understand, reject the Savior, and yet still build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ? Jacob asks the question for us:

And now, my beloved, how is it possible that these, after having rejected the sure foundation, can ever build upon it, that it may become the head of their corner? (4:17)

The allegory of the olive tree is Jacob’s attempt to explain this paradox to us.

Behold, my beloved brethren, I will unfold this mystery unto you; if I do not, by any means, get shaken from my firmness in the Spirit, and stumble because of my over anxiety for you. (4:18)

1. JACOB QUOTES ZENOS’S ALLEGORY OF THE OLIVE TREES (Jacob 5)

There are many ways to examine Zenos’s allegory. By the identification of a few consistent symbols most verses can be rendered in a form that makes interpretation a simple matter. For example:

1. Tame olive tree = House of Israel
2. Lord of the Vineyard = Savior
3. Servant = prophets, missionaries
4. Root = Covenant people or blood of Israel
5. Wild olive tree = Gentiles
6. Decay (bad fruit, bitter fruit) = breaking covenants
7. Good fruit = keeping covenants

8. Grafting = Gospel opportunities
9. Vineyard = World
10. Plucking (burning) = judgement (justice)
11. Pruning (digging) = mercy, patience, long-suffering
12. Dugging = Nourishing
13. Branches = groups of people

Practice interpreting the following verses using the explanations above:

And he said unto the servant: Look hither and behold the last. Behold, this have I planted in a good spot of ground; and I have nourished it this long time, and only a part of the tree hath brought forth tame fruit, and the other part of the tree hath brought forth wild fruit; behold, I have nourished this tree like unto the others. (5:25)

And now, behold, notwithstanding all the care which we have taken of my vineyard, the trees thereof have become corrupted, that they bring forth no good fruit; and these I had hoped to preserve, to have laid up fruit thereof against the season, unto mine own self. But, behold, they have become like unto the wild olive-tree, and they are of no worth but to be hewn down and cast into the fire; and it grieveth me that I should lose them. (5:46)

Wherefore, let us take of the branches of these which I have planted in the nethermost parts of my vineyard, and let us graft them into the tree from whence they came; and let us pluck from the tree those branches whose fruit is most bitter, and graft in the natural branches of the tree in the stead thereof. (5:52)

It may even be possible, though perhaps not necessary, to assign specific verses to particular historical events. The long time that passes away in verse 15 is probably the inter-testamental period from 400 BC to the birth of the Savior. Verse 46 may be an allusion to the great apostasy. Verse 25 seems to refer to the Nephites and Lamanites in the land of promise.

However, in my studying of this chapter, I have finally determined to study it in the frame of mind in which Jacob wrote it. That is, I have focused on the willingness of the master to help us when we make mistakes.

The Jews, in their stiff-neckedness and their hard-heartedness and their rejection of the Savior, made terrible mistakes. Jacob engraved this allegory on the plates (a herculean task!) in order to show us what the master of the vineyard did for them, and will do for us when we make mistakes. Try reading Jacob 5 with just this question in mind: “What can I learn here about what the Savior will do for those he loves when they stray from the strait and narrow path?”

The following list is my list—a collection of insights into the Love of the Savior—a list not quite like any other list from any other place in the scriptures.

- ‘ PRUNE—This word and the next two (dig, nourish) appear often together in this narrative. But the idea of pruning suggests a more drastic intervention than loosening the soil and applying fertilizer. Hebrews tells us that even the Savior “learned . . . obedience by the things which he suffered.” (Heb. 5:8) Job was pruned. Paul had his thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7). My son has diabetes. These afflictions speak to me more of pruning than of digging or nourishing.
- ‘ DIG—Alma speaks of being *harrowed up* by his sins. That would be digging in its most dramatic form. But in a milder form, this word makes me think of the loosening of soil around a plant to increase its ability to receive nutrients. Thus, as God digs about us, he may be trying to loosen the hardness of the soil of our hearts and the stiffness of our necks, to make us more responsive to the whisperings of the Spirit and the words of the Prophets
- ‘ NOURISH—Some form of this word shows up 20 times in Jacob 5. Moroni 6:4 speaks of our need to be “nourished by the good word of God . . .” We may be nourished in our spiritual weakness by the scriptures or the prophets or the words of loving friends and leaders and family members.
- ‘ GRAFT—In its literal use in this allegory, the word ‘graft’ refers to the transplanting of groups of people to increase the chance that they will respond to the opportunities and blessings of the gospel. But in a more general sense, the action of grafting refers to the efforts of the Lord to change the environment of groups, families, or individuals to increase the likelihood of their responding to the blessings and opportunities of the gospel. My wife picked up a woman on the street in front of our house during a blizzard. She and her family had moved to Orem from an eastern state for no better reason than that they felt it was the right thing to do. My wife shared a ride and,

before long, the gospel with her and her family. I think she had been grafted.

- ' GRIEVE—The grief of the Savior over the prospect of losing the trees and fruit of his vineyard is a constant theme in this allegory of Zenos. In eight different places Zenos speaks of the *grief* of the master over the lack of good fruit in the vineyard. Reading these verses again has reminded me of the experience of Enoch in Moses 7:28—“And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?” I think the Savior grieves, not because our sins have caused him to suffer, but because they will cause us to suffer.
- ' PRESERVE—Eleven times the Lord speaks of trying to preserve the trees and the fruit of the vineyard. In the face of decay and in the absence of acceptable fruit, and at a time when less devoted husbandmen might have turned the vineyard into firewood and started over, the Savior tries to preserve his people in righteousness. The pruning, digging, nourishing, and grafting, along with many of his efforts to follow are examples of his efforts to preserve his people until the time of the harvest.
- ' LABOR—Over and over again the Savior goes down to labor in the vineyard. He is not like the “householder, which planted a vineyard” and then “let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country” (Matt. 21:33). He himself labors in the vineyard. In fact, we are told that at the time of his final visit, when laborers are sent in the vineyard for the last time, “. . . that the servants did go and labor with their might; and the Lord of the vineyard labored also with them . . .”
- ' WENT DOWN; WENT FORTH; WATCHED; BEHELD—A number of phrases in Jacob 5 remind us that the Master of the Vineyard is watching us closely. He is keenly aware of all we say, think, and do: “BEHOLD and hearken, O ye elders of my church . . . whose prayers I have heard, and whose hearts I know, and whose desires have come up before me. Behold and lo, mine eyes are upon you, and the heavens and the earth are in mine hands, and the riches of eternity are mine to give” (D&C 67:1,2). His purpose, I suppose, is be ready to render assistance at the first sign of wandering.
- ' SELECT LOCATIONS—After the Lord had “hid[den] the natural branches”

of the tame tree in various places in the vineyard (Jacob 5:14), his servant asked, “How comest thou hither to plant this tree, or this branch of the tree? For behold, it was the poorest spot in all the land of thy vineyard. And the Lord of the vineyard said unto him: Counsel me not; I knew that it was a poor spot of ground; wherefore, I said unto thee, I have nourished it this long time, and thou beholdest that it hath brought forth much fruit (5:21,22). The Lord selects the locations for his people that will maximize the potential for good fruit. Elder Bruce R. McConkie said of this matter, “ Our Eternal Father knows all of his spirit children, and in his infinite wisdom, he chooses the very time that each comes to earth to gain a mortal body and undergo a probationary experience. Everything the Lord does is for the benefit and blessing of his children. And each of those children is subjected to the very trials and experiences that Omniscient Wisdom knows he should have” (Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah*, p.660).

- ‘ DUNG—This word, as mentioned above, might be included with nourishing and digging, but using it separately gives me the chance to include (again) this favorite quote about *dunging* [see Jacob 5:47, 64,76).

“On my way to visit the Jameses the other evening, I saw a wheat field that appeared to be greener and taller than the others. Thinking about it for awhile, I concluded that occasionally some loving farmer drives over the field with his tractor and pumps manure all over it. I thought, ‘My, it’s just like life. Here we are minding our own business, growing our little hearts out. We’re really quite green somewhat productive and very sincere. When out of the blue, life deals us a dirty one, and we’re up to our eyebrows in manure. We, of course, conclude that life as we have known it has just ended and will never be the same again. But one day, when the smell and the shock are gone, we find ourselves greener and more productive than we have been.’ Unfortunately, no matter how often we go through these growing experiences, we are never able to appreciate the sound of the tractor or the smell of the manure.” [Harold W. Wood].

By the way, if any of you can give me a more complete source for this quote, I will be most grateful.

- ‘ SPARE IT A LITTLE LONGER—At a time when all the trees of the vineyard were corrupted and brought forth no good fruit (5:46), both the

servant and the master agreed to spare the vineyard a little longer (5:50,51). It was ripe for burning. It deserved burning. This willingness to wait for judgement in hopes of repentance is in other scriptural locations called *patience* or *longsuffering*. It was this willingness that Ammon spoke of when he said, “Who could have supposed that our God would have been so merciful as to have snatched us from our awful, sinful, and polluted state?” (Alma 26:17)

- ‘ REJOICE EXCEEDINGLY—This is the response of the Savior when he anticipates success in preserving both roots and branches of the tame tree (5:60). We are promised that our joy will be great if we bring souls, but we are reminded that he has great joy too: “And how great is his joy in the soul that repenteth!” (D&C 18:13)
- ‘ LABOR DILIGENTLY WITH OUR MIGHT—At the beginning of the allegory, we saw the Master and his servants laboring, but as the end draws near, the nature of the labor seems to change (5:61,62,71). The language is similar to the instructions given in D&C 4: 2: “Therefore, O ye that embark in the service of God, see that ye serve him with all your heart, might, mind and strength, that ye may stand blameless before God at the last day.” The salvation of a soul worth any righteous effort.
- ‘ RECOVER—In Jacob 6, Jacob gives a brief review of the significance of the allegory. In verse 2 he repeats a promise often given in the scriptures that “he shall set his hand again the second time to recover his people.” He will do the same for all of his children, if they are willing to be recovered. Thus he promises in Mosiah 26:30 to forgive as often as repentance occurs. In Luke 5:4-6, he gives instruction to Peter and others, in spite of a night without success, to let down the nets again.
- ‘ REMEMBERETH—He remembers the House of Israel (6:4). “For can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee, O house of Israel.” (1 Nephi 21:15)
- ‘ HE CLEAVETH UNTO YOU—We are invited by Jacob to have as much affection for the Lord as he has for us (6:5). He will not abandon us for some minor infraction of the rules. Pres. J Reuben Clark said, “I believe that his juridical concept of his dealings with his children could be expressed in this way: I believe that in his justice and mercy he will give us the maximum

reward for our acts, give us all that he can give, and in the reverse, I believe that he will impose upon us the minimum penalty which it is possible for him to impose.” (J. Reuben Clark, Jr., Conference Report, October 1953, p.84)

- ‘ HIS ARM OF MERCY IS EXTENDED—This is a wonderful conclusion to our analysis of this allegory. The words and phrases above offer powerful evidence of his mercy. In the same way that he invited the woman taken in adultery (see John 8:1-11) to repent and return, he has invited us to find security in the everlasting arms of his mercy.

2. JACOB EXHORTS HIS LISTENERS TO REPENT AND FOLLOW CHRIST (Jacob 6)

The purpose of the allegory, once again is to tell us how it is possible to make mistakes—even huge mistakes—and still receive the blessings of the atonement. In chapter 6, Jacob makes this point eloquently:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I beseech of you in words of soberness that ye would repent, and come with full purpose of heart, and cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of mercy is extended towards you in the light of the day, harden not your hearts. Yea, today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts; for why will ye die? For behold, after ye have been nourished by the good word of God all the day long, will ye bring forth evil fruit, that ye must be hewn down and cast into the fire? Behold, will ye reject these words? Will ye reject the words of the prophets; and will ye reject all the words which have been spoken concerning Christ, after so many have spoken concerning him; and deny the good word of Christ, and the power of God, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, and quench the Holy Spirit, and make a mock of the great plan of redemption, which hath been laid for you? (Jacob 6:5-8)

And finally, this note:

O be wise; what can I say more? (Jacob 6:12)

It seems fairly clear from the ending verses of Jacob 6 that Jacob thought he was finished with his work on the plates.

Finally, I bid you farewell, until I shall meet you before the pleasing bar of God, which bar striketh the wicked with awful dread and fear. Amen. (Jacob 6:13)

3. SHEREM'S FALSE TEACHINGS (Jacob 7)

Jacob's experiences with Sherem were so significant that he wrote on the plates again. He must have known that there was a message for our day in his experience with the first of the major anti-Christ's in the Book of Mormon.

I think that the major part of this chapter is an description of the ways in which we can become strong in the faith—so strong that we cannot be shaken.

Last week we referred to something Jacob said of himself and others

Wherefore, we search the prophets, and we have many revelations and the spirit of prophecy; and having all these witnesses we obtain a hope, and our faith becometh unshaken, insomuch that we truly can command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey us, or the mountains, or the waves of the sea. (Jacob 4:6)

The result of these many witnesses is a great hope and an unshaken faith in the Savior. Jacob tells us of his encounter with Sherem that “he [Sherem] had hope to shake me [Jacob] from the faith” (7:5)

. . . notwithstanding the many revelations and the many things which I had seen concerning these things; for I truly had seen angels, and they had ministered unto me. And also, I had heard the voice of the Lord speaking unto me in very word, from time to time; wherefore, *I could not be shaken.* (Jacob 7:5, *emphasis added*)

The sequence seems to work something like this: We search the prophets and the scriptures, we have many revelations and spiritual experiences, and our faith becomes unshaken and unshakeable. How many times as you have searched the scriptures have you been tutored and enlightened by the Spirit.

President Faust spoke of an experience related to this pattern in October General Conference of 2000:

As I look back over my life, I recognize one source of singular strength and blessing. It is my testimony and knowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior and Redeemer of all mankind. I am profoundly grateful that all of my life I have had a simple faith that Jesus is the Christ. That witness has been confirmed to me hundreds of times. It is the crowning knowledge of my soul. It is the spiritual light of my being. It is the cornerstone of my life (Pres. James E. Faust, Ensign, Nov. 2000, pp. 53, 59).

That witness can be confirmed in many ways. For example, it can and ought to happen as we search the word of God:

Behold, canst thou read this without rejoicing and lifting up thy heart for gladness? (D&C 19:39)

Sherem demanded a sign (7:13), and he was smitten by the Lord (7:14,15). The experience of Sherem reminds me of a story related by George A. Smith regarding another sign-seeker. I have used it before in these lessons, but perhaps another telling will not be offensive.

When The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was first founded, you could see persons rise up and ask, 'What sign will you show us that we may be able to believe?' I recollect a Campbellite preacher who came to Joseph Smith, I think his name was Hayden. He came in and made himself known to Joseph, and said that he had come a considerable distance to be convinced of the truth. 'Why,' said he, 'Mr. Smith, I want to know the truth, and when I am convinced, I will spend all my talents and time in defending and spreading the doctrines of your religion, and I will give you to understand that to convince me is equivalent to convincing all my society, amounting to several hundreds.' Well, Joseph commenced laying before him the coming forth of the work, and the first principles of the Gospel, when Mr. Hayden exclaimed, 'O this is not the evidence I want, the evidence that I wish to have is a notable miracle; I want to see some powerful manifestation of the power of God, I want to see a notable miracle performed; and if you perform such a one, then I will believe with all my heart and soul, and will exert all my power and all my extensive influence to convince others; and if you will not perform a miracle of this kind, then I am your worst and bitterest enemy.' 'Well,' said

Joseph, 'what will you have done? Will you be struck blind, or dumb? Will you be paralyzed, or will you have one hand withered? Take your choice, choose which you please, and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ it shall be done' 'That is not the kind of miracle I want,' said the preacher. 'Then, sir,' replied Joseph, 'I can perform none; I am not going to bring any trouble upon any body else, sir, to convince you'" (JD 2:326).

Sherem was thereby discredited and Jacob was successful in reclaiming the people.

And it came to pass that peace and the love of God was restored again among the people . . .

The key to that restoration and to the protection of the people was that “they searched the scriptures . . .” (7:23).

CONCLUSION:

The testimony of the allegory about the limitless concern of God for the welfare of his children is a wonderful reminder to us of our own security in righteousness in his love. These phrases offer a deep and abiding witness of the willingness of the Father to help us and bless us and protect us:

Jacob 5:46 speaks of “all the care which we [the Lord and his servants] have taken.

In 5:41, 47, and 49, the Lord asks, “What could I have done more?”

In 5:47 the Lord asks, “Have I slackened my hand?” And in 5:47 and 6:4, he answers that question: “I have stretched forth my hand almost all the day long.”

6:4)—These four phrases speak of the continuous concern of the Savior for the welfare of his children in the vineyard. His only business is the welfare of his people, and his greatest desire is that his suffering and his teaching and his example shall be meaningful in helping them to have a fulness of joy: “He doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world . . .” (2 Nephi 26:24). All of us are invited to build on the Stone of Israel, which is “the great, and the last, and the only sure foundation, upon which the Jews [or anyone else] can build” (Jacob 4:16).

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