

HAVE YE RECEIVED HIS IMAGE IN YOUR COUNTENANCES?

Alma 5-7

by Ted L. Gibbons

QUOTE OF THE WEEK: Like the Bible, [The Book of Mormon] is a volume of holy writ that speaks forth the mind and will of the Almighty. Like the Bible, it invites men to forsake the world and live as becometh saints. Like the Bible, it has such an impact upon the hearts of men that they are prepared to die in defense of their beliefs. Already the ten thousands of Ephraim and the thousands of Manasseh have left Babylon and come to Zion with songs of everlasting joy because of it. And before the end of the world, which is the premillennial destruction of the wicked, and before the end of the earth, which shall not occur until after the Millennium, the Book of Mormon shall so affect men that the whole earth and all its peoples will have been influenced and governed by it. (Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah*, p.170)

INTRODUCTION: Alma's reform movement involved at least these four cities: Zarahemla, Gideon, Melek, and Ammonihah. These chapters deal with his ministry in Zarahemla and in Gideon. Once Alma had determined the depth of the iniquity in the Church, and had freed himself from the restraints of public office, he went forth to try and reclaim the people in the best way he knew how—by the power of his testimony. His efforts in Zarahemla and Gideon (and in Melek for that matter—see Alma 8:3-6) met with great success.

1. ALMA TEACHES THE PEOPLE HOW THEY CAN EXPERIENCE A MIGHTY CHANGE OF HEART (Alma 5)

Notice in Alma 5:2 where the account of this sermon in Zarahemla comes from. Does it matter that our personal history contains this kind of information, or is this a concern only for the Prophet? President Kimball taught this:

Keep journals and family records. Let us then continue on in this important work of recording the things we do, the things we say, the things we think, to be in accordance with the instructions of the Lord.

For those of you who may not have already started your books of remembrance and your records, we would suggest that this very day you begin to write your records quite fully and completely. We hope that you will do this, our brothers and sisters, for this is what the Lord has commanded. (*The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, p.349)

The multitude of questions Alma asks are worth a careful, personal look. But it seems clear that there is one question in the sermon, what might we call the *critical question*, that must be answered correctly. That question is asked five different times toward the end of the sermon. The question is in verses 53-56 and it is this: if you are doing any of these things that are contrary to the teaching of the gospel, *will ye persist?* If you have found something in this sermon that needs your attention, or that needs repentance, will you repent? Or will you persist in rebelling against the commandments of God?

And now my beloved brethren, I say unto you, can ye withstand these sayings; yea, can ye lay aside these things, and trample the Holy One under your feet; yea, can ye be puffed up in the pride of your hearts; yea, will ye still *persist* in the wearing of costly apparel and setting your hearts upon the vain things of the world, upon your riches? Yea, will ye *persist* in supposing that ye are better one than another; yea, will ye *persist* in the persecution of your brethren, who humble themselves and do walk after the holy order of God, wherewith they have been brought into this church, having been sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and they do bring forth works which are meet for repentance—Yea, and will you *persist* in turning your backs upon the poor, and the needy, and in withholding your substance from them? And finally, all ye that will *persist* in your wickedness, I say unto you that these are they who shall be hewn down and cast into the fire except they speedily repent (Alma 5:53-57).

This is a matter that receives attention other places in the scripture. For example, in Mosiah 2, Benjamin spoke of the danger of *listing* to obey the evil spirit. To list means to lean or incline. We all do that to some degree. All of us are sinners. But Benjamin's warning is not just for those who list, but for those who list and will not repent

Jacob warned those who seek and who love riches, and think themselves better than those who possess less stuff.

And now, my brethren, do ye suppose that God justifieth you in this thing? Behold, I say unto you, Nay. But he condemneth you, and if ye persist in these things his judgments must speedily come unto you (Jacob 2:14).

Benjamin did not use the word persist, but he addressed the concept.

For behold, there is a wo pronounced upon him who listeth to obey that spirit; for if he listeth to obey him, and remaineth and dieth in his sins, the same drinketh damnation to his own soul; for he receiveth for his wages an everlasting punishment, having transgressed the law of God contrary to his own knowledge. (Mosiah 2:33)

It is one thing to list. We ought not to, and if we do, we ought to repent. But is another and a much more dangerous thing to list and persist.

Abinadi spoke of this to King Noah and his court:

But remember that he that persists in his own carnal nature, and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion against God, remaineth in his fallen state and the devil hath all power over him. Therefore, he is as though there was no redemption made, being an enemy to God; and also is the devil an enemy to God. (Mosiah 16:5)

The Lord says it more simply in D&C 42:

And he that doeth according to these things shall be saved, and he that doeth them not shall be damned if he so continue. (D&C 42:60)

As you review the questions Alma has asked, take a look inside yourself. Are you willing to cease and desist, or are you more inclined to persist?

As Alma concludes his sermon, he bears a powerful testimony.

Do ye not suppose that I know of these things myself? Behold, I testify unto you that I do know that these things whereof I have spoken are true(Alma 5:45).

At the end of verse 45, Alma asks an additional question: “And how do ye suppose that I know of their surety?” I remember reading that question for the first time. The story of Alma the younger had thrilled me and blessed me. His confrontation with the angel was perhaps the most vivid message I absorbed my first time through the book. Thus, when I read Alma’s question, “And how do ye suppose that I know of their surety?” I was pretty sure that I already knew the answer.

Alma was about to declare that he knew those things were true because an angel descended from the courts of glory and told him they were true.

But that is not what he said. Alma had seen an angel (Mosiah 27:1`1-16), and afterward he was born of the Spirit (Alma 27:24), and he said he thought he saw God sitting on his throne (Alma 36:22).

But notice what he says when he tells how he knows the truth

Behold, I say unto you they are made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God. Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself. And now I do know of myself that they are true; for the Lord God hath made them manifest unto me by his Holy Spirit; and this is the spirit of revelation which is in me. And moreover, I say unto you that it has thus been revealed unto me, that the words which have been spoken by our fathers are true, even so according to the spirit of prophecy which is in me, which is also by the manifestation of the Spirit of God. (Alma 5:46,47)

If Alma had seen God and an angel, and had been born again before he preached his first missionary sermon, why did he have to fast and pray for a testimony?

Perhaps this statement from Bishop Robert L. Simpson provides part of the answer:

Testimonies built on miracles alone are at best shallow and can only be perpetuated by other miracles. Such is not the eternal process

considered best for the acquisition of a testimony that can withstand ...troubles (New Era, March 1972, p. 4).

But there is more to Alma's testimony than a certainty that the Church is true. Alma has been asking a multitude of questions related to the doctrine of the Church, and has just delivered a solemn warning to those who refuse to abide by those doctrines—a warning of fire. He has fasted and prayed for testimonies of the truthfulness and meaning of many of the principles of the Gospel.

Elder Legrande Richards explained how valuable a man like Alma can be in a society.

The story is told that there was a new minister who moved into the community where Thomas Carlisle lived, and he went to the office of Carlisle and asked this question: "What do the people of this community need more than anything else?" And Carlisle's answer was: "They need a man who knows God other than my hearsay." (Improvement Era, June 1858, p. 98)

Alma was a man who knew God *other than by hearsay*. And he knew him because of his fasting and his prayers. His witness, based on personal experience, was the catalyst for thousands of conversions.

2. ALMA AND THE PEOPLE ESTABLISH THE ORDER OF THE CHURCH IN ZARAHENMLA (Alma 6)

Alma knew he couldn't do the work alone. Too many needed the message. All who were converted were to accept some of the responsibility for those who were not.

Nevertheless 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)

I remember to consecutive weeks during my teen-age years in Logan when our ward gathered together in fasting and prayer for the welfare of the *bodies* of some

members who knew God quite well. One father disappeared over the mountains in a small plane on a business flight to Wyoming. We fasted and gathered together to pray for his safety as searchers combed the mountains.

One week later we were fasting again. A retired member of the ward, who had been helping set roof joists in our new building, fell from the scaffolding to the concrete floor below. He was in a coma in the hospital. We fasted another day and gathered to pray for him.

But I do not remember ever being invited to fast for the non-members living within our ward area, nor for the inactive and indifferent members who were around us. Alma teaches us that souls are as important as bodies, and worth as least as much physical and spiritual effort.

According to Alma 6:3, what characteristic kept many in Alma's day from knowing God? Ask yourself (if you are a teacher, ask your students), who is there among my family or friends or acquaintances that needs my fasting and mighty prayers? As you consider this question, remember that Alma, who must have given the commandment, had some first hand knowledge about the redemptive power of fasting and mighty prayer. His father had fasted and prayed for him when he did not know God.

3. ALMA TESTIFIES OF JESUS CHRIST. HE ENCOURAGES THE PEOPLE IN GIDEON TO FOLLOW THE SAVIOR. (Alma 7)

In Gideon, Alma delivered one of the great sermons about the Savior in the scriptures. Of all the things he might have taught, he chose this one:

For behold, I say unto you there be many things to come; and behold, there is one thing which is of more importance than they all--for behold, the time is not far distant that the Redeemer liveth and cometh among his people. (Alma 7:7)

One way to look at this chapter is to focus on a word used four times by Alma, and to reflect on the applications associated with that word. The word is *path*, and it appears in verses 9, 19, and 20.

But behold, the Spirit hath said this much unto me, saying: Cry unto this people, saying--Repent ye, and prepare the way of the Lord, and *walk in his paths, which are straight*; for behold, the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and the Son of God cometh upon the face of the earth. (Alma 7:9, *emphasis added*)

For I perceive that *ye are in the paths of righteousness*; I perceive that ye are in the path which leads to the kingdom of God; yea, I perceive that *ye are making his paths straight*. (Alma 7:19, *emphasis added*)

I perceive that it has been made known unto you, by the testimony of his word, that *he cannot walk in crooked paths*; neither doth he vary from that which he hath said; neither hath he a shadow of turning from the right to the left, or from that which is right to that which is wrong; therefore, his course is one eternal round. (Alma 7:20, *emphasis added*)

Read Alma 7 and look for the qualities of those who are trying to walk in his paths. I will give my own list below, but you might consider performing your own search before you influence your conclusions with my observations.

1. Alma 7:3--Be humble
2. Alma 7:3--Continue in supplication
3. Alma 7:3--Be blameless
4. Alma 7:6--Don't be lifted up in the pride of your hearts
5. Alma 7:6--Don't set your heart upon riches
6. Alma 7:6--Worship the true and living God
7. Alma 7:6--Look forward to the remission of your sins
8. Alma 7:9--Repent
9. Alma 7:9--Prepare the way of the Lord
10. Alma 7:14--Be born again
11. Alma 7:14--Be baptized
12. Alma 7:14--Have faith
13. Alma 7:15--Come and fear not
14. Alma 7:15--Lay aside every sin
15. Alma 7:15--Enter into a covenant with him to keep his commandments
16. Alma 7:22--Awaken to a sense of your duty

17. Alma 7:23—Be submissive and gentle
18. Alma 7:23—Be full of patience and long-suffering
19. Alma 7:23—Be temperate in all things
20. Alma 7:23--Ask God for whatever you need
21. Alma 7:24--Always return thanks to God for what you receive
22. Alma 7:26—Give diligence and heed to the word

Alma encouraged the people of Gideon to walk in the Lord's paths, which are straight. They must be straight, for "he cannot walk in crooked paths." What this means is explained quite nicely in D&C 3:1-3:

THE works, and the designs, and the purposes of God cannot be frustrated, neither can they come to naught. For God doth not walk in crooked paths, neither doth he turn to the right hand nor to the left, neither doth he vary from that which he hath said, therefore his paths are straight, and his course is one eternal round. Remember, remember that it is not the work of God that is frustrated, but the work of men . . .

God does not get frustrated, he doesn't turn to the right hand or the left, and he doesn't vary from what he says: therefore, he cannot walk in *crooked paths*.

Alma 7 also contains holy writ's finest description of the empathy of Christ. We are taught that he suffered in many ways so that he could understand our needs when we suffer. Listen to the language:

And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people. And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities. Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh . . . (Alma 7:11-13)

He can help us bear our pains and our sicknesses because he has already taken upon

himself our pains and our sicknesses. Because of this, he can say to us in our agony, “I understand.” An amazing insight from these verses comes in the revelatory discovery that he did not have to experience our pains and temptations and sicknesses and infirmities in the flesh to know what they were like. “The Spirit knoweth all things . . .”

Scriptural evidence for this *knowing without experiencing* can be found in the 22nd Psalm. A thousand years before the actual event, the Savior gave through David a graphic description of the pain of crucifixion. *He knew, by the Spirit, precisely what kind of experience it would be.* Read Psalm 22:1,7,13-18.

But he suffered *according to the flesh* “so that *his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh . . .*” I believe that many of his disciples have heard his quiet whisper in times of pain or times of trouble, “I understand.” I know I have. The burdens were not lifted, but I received strength enough to carry on, for I knew I was loved.

CONCLUSION: Alma 7 is like a pair of spiritual contact lenses. Looking through it we see the atonement of Christ more clearly than we have ever seen it before. We are offered a unique view of what the Savior has done for us—a view unlike any other in the scriptures. Of that view, Elder Maxwell said:

In the description of the exquisite suffering of Jesus in His atonement, we are told that Jesus took upon Himself the infirmities of all of us in order "that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities." (Alma 7:12) Being sinless Himself, Jesus could not have suffered for personal sin nor known what such agony is—unless He took upon Him our sins, not only to redeem us and to save us, but also in order that He might know how "according to the flesh . . . to succor his people according to their infirmities." A stunning insight!

Thus the compassion of the divine Jesus for us is not the abstract compassion of a sinless individual who would never so suffer; rather, it is the compassion and empathy of One who has suffered exquisitely, though innocent, for all our sins, which were compounded in some way

we do not understand. Though He was sinless, yet He suffered more than all of us. We cannot tell Him anything about suffering. This is one of the inner marvels of the atonement of Jesus Christ! (Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience*, p.35 - p.36)

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