

BOOK OF MORMON LESSON #30
“THE GREAT PLAN OF HAPPINESS”

Alma 40-42
by Ted L. Gibbons

QUOTE OF THE WEEK:

It is about the Book of Mormon I want to talk today. I do so with just one objective in mind: To get you to read it.

I have read it a little, I believe in it, and I love it. I recommend that every person within the sound of my voice read the Book of Mormon. I can testify, as did Nephi, that the things written therein persuadeth all men to do good. It will enrich the life of every person who will read it, unless he is in rebellion against the truth; and in that event it will advise him of his awful fate unless he changes his ways. (Elder Marion G. Romney, C.R., April 1949)

INTRODUCTION: Many years ago I recorded on tape a book by Grant von Harrison called *Fathers as Patriarchs*. Mr. Harrison had prepared a wonderful document on the responsibilities of Fathers and on the divine expectations resident in the calling of a father—especially a father with the Melchizedek priesthood. No better example of the meeting of those expectations can be found in the standard works than the patriarchal interview between Alma and his son Corianton. Their discussions are wonderful for the doctrine so clearly articulated by Alma, but they are equally wonderful for what they teach fathers about how to be fathers.

1. ALMA TEACHES CORIANTON ABOUT DEATH AND RESURRECTION

(Alma 40:1-23)

Corianton had four concerns or questions that troubled him. They may have been, at least in part, responsible for his diversion from the path. It is difficult for your feet to be “firm, steadfast, and immovable” (see 1 Nephi 2:10) when your mind isn’t. Corianton’s lack of understanding may have weakened his ability to resist temptation, and may also have increased his dependence on his own strength and wisdom (see Alma 39:4)

The questions, which he apparently never asked, but which his father knew nevertheless, are reported in these words of Alma:

1. “Behold you marvel why these things [the coming of and the ministry of Christ] should be known so long beforehand” (39:17)
2. “Thy mind is worried concerning the resurrection of the dead.” (Alma 40:1)
3. And now, my son, I have somewhat to say concerning *the restoration of which has been spoken*; for behold, some have wrested the scriptures, and have gone far astray because of this thing. And *I perceive that thy mind has been worried also concerning this thing*. But behold, I will explain it unto thee . . . (Alma 41:1, *emphasis added*)
4. And now, my son, I perceive there is somewhat more which doth worry your mind, which ye cannot understand--which is concerning the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner; for ye do try to suppose that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery. (Alma 42:1)

Alma’s responses to these concerns form the outline for these chapters.

Soon after you begin to read Alma 40 you will learn that you probably know more about the *mechanics* of the resurrection than Alma did. And Alma does not pretend to know it all:

Now, I unfold unto you a mystery; nevertheless, there are many mysteries which are kept, that no one knoweth them save God himself. But I show unto you one thing which I have inquired diligently of God that I might know--that is concerning the resurrection. (Alma 40:3)

One of those mysteries Alma explains as follows:

Behold, there is a time appointed that all shall come forth from the dead. Now when this time cometh no one knows; but God knoweth the time which is appointed.

Now, whether there shall be one time, or a second time, or a third time, that men shall come forth from the dead, it mattereth

not; for God knoweth all these things; and it sufficeth me to know that this is the case--that there is a time appointed that all shall rise from the dead. (Alma 40:4,5)

But Alma does know that

. . . there is a time appointed unto men that they shall rise from the dead; and there is a space between the time of death and the resurrection. And now, concerning this space of time, what becometh of the souls of men is the thing which I have inquired diligently of the Lord to know; and this is the thing of which I do know. . . .

Behold, it has been made known unto me by an angel, that the spirits of all men, as soon as they are departed from this mortal body, yea, the spirits of all men, whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life. (Alma 40:9,11)

Those spirits, depending on their mortal experiences and obedience are received either into a state of happiness, paradise, peace, and rest, or into a state that Alma calls *outer darkness* by which he clearly means *spirit prison*. (See Alma 40:12,13)

The nature of this existence in the world of spirits was described by Brigham Young as follows:

When you lay down this tabernacle, where are you going? Into the spiritual world. Are you going into Abraham's bosom? No, not anywhere nigh there but into the spirit world. Where is the spirit world? It is right here. Do the good and evil spirits go together? Yes, they do. Do they both inhabit one kingdom? Yes, they do. Do they go to the sun? No. Do they go beyond the boundaries of the organized earth? No, they do not. They are brought forth upon this earth, for the express purpose of inhabiting it to all eternity. Where else are you going? Nowhere else, only as you may be permitted.

Suppose the Lord should touch your eyes that you might see,

could you then see the spirits? Yes, as plainly as you now see bodies, as did the servant of Elijah. If the Lord would permit it, and it was his will that it should be done you could see the spirits that have departed from this world, as plainly as you now see bodies with your natural eyes. (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, pp. 376-380)

Joseph Smith said:

The righteous and the wicked all go to the same world of spirits until the resurrection. (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.310)

There are some significant differences in the state of spirits in the world of spirits. Joseph Smith also said:

The spirits of the just are exalted to a greater and more glorious work; hence they are blessed in their departure to the world of spirits. Enveloped in flaming fire, they are not far from us, and know and understand our thoughts, feelings, and motions, and are often pained therewith. (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.326)

As to the nature of the resurrection which will come to all after some space of time in the world of spirits, Alma declares that

The soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul; yea, and every limb and joint shall be restored to its body; yea, even a hair of the head shall not be lost; but all things shall be restored to their proper and perfect frame. (Alma 40:23)

This is wonderful doctrine, doctrine to which those of us who are *hairing impaired* cling with particular tenacity.

**2. ALMA TEACHES THAT AFTER WE ARE RESURRECTED, THE
RIGHTEOUS WILL BE RESTORED TO HAPPINESS AND THE WICKED
WILL BE RESTORED TO MISERY**

(Alma 40:24-26; 41)

Elder McConkie, who wrote the chapter headings for these new editions of the Standard Works, summarized part of the message of Alma 41 by saying, *“Every person receives again in the restoration the characteristics and attributes acquired in mortality.”* (Alma 41: chapter head)

To say it another way, *death will not change your personality nor your desires*. Neither death nor the resurrection can make of you something you never were. In other words,

. . . 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)

Or, as Alma had explained just verses earlier, “Do not suppose . . . that ye shall be restored from sin to happiness.” (Alma 41:10) Such a thing is contrary to the justice of God and to the law of restoration, “for that which ye do send our shall return unto you again.” (41:15)

In Alma 34, Amulek taught this same doctrine.

I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed. Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world (Alma 34:33-34).

Can you see that one of the problems with death-bed repentance is that a person might not have time to change his nature, even if he or she has in fact changed his or her mind.

When I was preparing for my mission, I received a letter of valuable counsel

from my brother who was serving in Holland. I remember this phrase from his letter: “There is no magic in a mission call.” How true that is. The paper signed by the prophet did not change me. I took into the field what I was—not what I wanted to be or should have been or hoped to be, but what I was. To continue this analogy: there is no magic in marriage. We bring to our marriage what we are. And finally, following Amulek and Alma, there is no magic in death. The spirit that leaves our body at death is the same spirit that possessed our body in life. And the body that comes out of the grave will be the same one that was laid in the grave.

ALMA TEACHES CORIANTON ABOUT JUSTICE AND MERCY (Alma 42)

The scriptures say (or imply) that we are

- imperfect
- lost
- fallen
- corrupted
- unclean
- unworthy
- impure
- unholy
- sinful
- carnal
- sensual
- devilish

That being the case, what do we deserve as a final reward for our mortal experiences? To put it plainly, we deserve to go to hell. Since “no unclean thing can dwell with God . . .” (1 Nephi 10:21), and since “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God,” we have no legitimate claim on heaven.

Let me paraphrase an idea from the book *Believing Christ* by Stephen Robinson. My computer has default settings. When I turn it on, certain things appear on the startup bar. Certain programs offer access through shortcuts on the desktop. When I load this program, it opens with a pre-

selected font and font size. The appearance of the screen is determined by those default settings—the margins, the line spacing, the font color.

Life comes with a default setting also, and that default setting is for justice. And the law of justice requires that we suffer eternally for our sins. If we take life as it comes and live it according to the inclinations of the natural man (Mosiah 3:19), we will be judged for our sins and condemned to something less than the best the Father has to offer. We do not need to earn a ticket to hell. We need to earn a ticket to heaven.

This is the central concept in Alma's teachings in Alma 42. Corianton seems to have been troubled by the teaching that an all powerful God, full of love and grace and truth, would punish those he loved with a debt of eternal suffering. "Now behold, my son, I will explain this thing unto thee," Alma promises. (Alma 42:1) Alma 42 is the result of that promise.

- ' Once man had become as God, knowing good and evil, he was evicted from the Garden of Eden to prevent his partaking of the tree of life. If he had partaken, doing so have caused him to live forever in his sins.

For behold, if Adam had put forth his hand immediately, and partaken of the tree of life, he would have lived forever, according to the word of God, having no space for repentance; yea, and also the word of God would have been void, and the great plan of salvation would have been frustrated. (Alma 42:5)

Alma explained this to the people of Ammonihah in this way:

And now behold, if it were possible that our first parents could have gone forth and partaken of the tree of life they would have been forever miserable, having no preparatory state; and thus the plan of redemption would have been frustrated, and the word of God would have been void, taking none effect. (Alma 12:26)

Perhaps when Satan told the woman that she would not “surely die” (Moses 4:13), this is what he had in mind. *Once they have partaken of the tree of knowledge, I will get them to partake of the tree of life, and the plan will be eternally and irrevocably frustrated, for they will be immortal, sinful beings.*

And now, ye see by this that our first parents were cut off both temp-orally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord; and thus we see they became subjects to follow after their own will. (Alma 42:7)

Agency without death would have placed Adam and Eve (and their offspring!) in a impossible situation, for their first transgression would have banned them forever from the presence of God, for “no unclean thing can dwell with God.” (1 Nephi 10:21) Thus

it was not expedient that man should be reclaimed from this temporal death, for that would destroy the great plan of happiness. (Alma 42:8)

At least they must not be reclaimed from temporal death until they had been reclaimed from spiritual death:

Therefore, as the soul could never die, and the fall had brought upon all mankind a spiritual death as well as a temporal, that is, they were cut off from the presence of the Lord, *it was expedient that mankind should be reclaimed from this spiritual death.* (42:8, *emphasis added*)

Therefore “death hath passed upon all men, to fulfil the merciful plan of the great Creator . . .” (2 Nephi 9:6), and this state became a time to learn and to repent and to prepare, a time to overcome spiritual death through the merits and grace of the Redeemer.

Therefore, as they had become carnal, sensual, and devilish, by nature, this probationary state became a state for them to prepare; it became a preparatory state. (Alma 42:10)

Alma summarizes this for Corianton:

And now remember, my son, if it were not for the plan of redemption, (laying it aside) as soon as they were dead their souls were miserable, being cut off from the presence of the Lord. (Alma 42:11)

The fall placed all men within the grasp of justice. Thereby they became agents who could answer for their own deeds and misdeeds. And all who became accountable would be guilty of misdeeds, for

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)

And so Alma explained the results of the fall without the redemption:

And thus we see that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice; yea, the justice of God, which consigned them forever to be cut off from his presence. (Alma 42:14)

Having placed the plan of justice in effect, and having made man accountable, the Lord could now introduce another plan to make it possible to overcome spiritual death, a plan that would enable God to be both just and merciful.

And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also. (Alma 42:15)

That plan could only work with repentance, and repentance could only be encouraged if “there were a punishment, which also was eternal as the life of the soul should be, affixed opposite to the plan of happiness, which was as eternal also as the life of the soul.” (Alma 42:16)

‘ The plan therefore required the ability to sin, laws to define sin, and penalties for sinning.

Now, how could a man repent except he should sin?
How could he sin if there was no law? How could
there be a law save there was a punishment? (Alma
42:17)

If there were no law—for example, if the death penalty were not affixed as a punishment for murder—“would [a man] be afraid he would die if he should murder?” (Alma 42:19)

And also, if there was no law given against sin men
would not be afraid to sin. (Alma 42:20)

But the law by itself is not enough, for the law must include a punishment.
“But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed . . .” (Alma 42:22)

When I lived in North Carolina in 1971, the state legislature passed a law making the operation of certain types of sexually oriented businesses a crime. The law as passed specified the crime and the punishment. I was told that within two days, about 300 adult businesses had closed their doors. But on the third day, the state supreme court issued an injunction preventing the enforcement of the law until it could be reviewed for constitutionality. The next day every business was open again. The law was still on the books, but suddenly there was no “punishment affixed . . .” Without the punishment, the law had no meaning, and could be safely ignored.

And so it is with us. The punishment (the suffering) attached to the laws of God and invoked upon those who violate those laws is designed to be a motivation to obey, or, in the case of sin, to repent . . .

But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a
repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth;
otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law,
and the law inflicteth the punishment . . . (Alma 42:22)

Therefore it is impossible that mercy should rob justice (see Alma 42:25),
which is probably the very thing Corianton thought ought to happen. He
wanted a God who was only merciful, a God for whom justice was

unthinkable, and punishment unacceptable.

CONCLUSION:

The plan in the way Alma had explained it to his wayward son enabled God to bring

about his great and eternal purposes, which were prepared from the foundation of the world. And thus cometh about the salvation and the redemption of men, and also their destruction and misery. Therefore, O my son, whosoever will come may come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds.(Alma 42:26.,27)

The plan Alma explained to Corianton enables God to retain his celestial residence as a place of perfect purity and cleanliness—an environment where filthiness has no place—and still be a place in which his children can dwell eternally with a fulness of joy through the great plan of justice and mercy. Therefore, the Book of Mormon says to us what Alma said to Corianton:

. . . let the justice of God, and his mercy, and his long-suffering have full sway in your heart; and let it bring you down to the dust in humility. (Alma 42:30)

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