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## "ABIDING BY ITS PRECEPTS"

*Elder Joe J. Christensen*

**I**t is hard for me to believe that fifty-one years ago, in the fall of 1956, I was a very green first-year BYU graduate student. I had been invited to teach two religion classes. The dean assigned me to share office space with Reid Bankhead in the old Joseph Smith Building. The entrance to his office was through the same outer door as that of Dr. Sidney B. Sperry. I had enrolled in religion classes taught by both of these brethren. I felt like a pygmy every time I entered the area. (If Dr. Sperry were still around, I would probably feel the same way today.) I had read and quoted from many of Dr. Sperry's articles and books and had learned to admire him years before having that relatively close geographical proximity for a full academic year. I had several opportunities to visit with him personally on one scriptural or doctrinal question or another. He treated me with courtesy and deference far beyond that which I felt I deserved. He made me feel very much at home. So I doubly consider it a privilege to be here with you today in this symposium that bears his name. He certainly is one of the great pioneer intellectual gospel scholars of our modern era.

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In the previous thirty-five Sperry symposia, much distinguished scholarly research has been presented and published, adding to the wealth of information benefiting all of us. I pay tribute to those who have made such contributions because they have helped us, as the Apostle Peter said, to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh . . . a reason of the hope that is in [us]” (1 Peter 3:15).

This symposium is distinctive in that it centers on the practical application of the precepts taught in the Book of Mormon—precepts that can help us draw nearer to God. My hope is that all of us who hear or read the content of this symposium will be prompted to do some deep soul searching and discover the areas wherein the Book of Mormon provides us the precepts that, if applied in our lives, can bring us closer to God. This is an occasion for all of us literally to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

### THE BOOK OF MORMON IN CES CURRICULUM

The Book of Mormon has not always held the place in our Church Educational System that it does today. For example, I have a seminary graduation pin which, in my day, was commonly worn by those who had completed three high-school years of seminary study. The courses included classes in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Church history. In some few areas where ninth graders were permitted to take seminary, a Book of Mormon course had been approved, but that didn’t happen until 1961—forty-nine years after the first seminary program was initiated adjacent to Granite High School in Salt Lake City in 1912.

Here is a little historical background that those of us who are older may recall. In 1970, when Elder Neal A. Maxwell was appointed commissioner of the Church Educational System, I was called home shortly after beginning to serve as president of the Mexico City Mission to assist as associate commissioner for seminaries and institutes of religion.

The Church Board of Education at that time included the entire First Presidency, all of the Quorum of the Twelve, the Presiding Bishop, and Sister Belle Spafford, the general president of the Relief Society. In March 1972, we placed on the board’s agenda a quiet yet revolutionary proposal that the graduation requirements for seminary would be increased from three to four years, with the Book of Mormon as one

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of the required courses. The board approved. I recall a personal conversation with President Spencer W. Kimball, then Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, in which he commented, “I have wondered why we hadn’t done this years ago.” From that time on, every seminary graduate has had the privilege of completing a course of study in this most important, life-changing volume of scripture—the Book of Mormon. For that I am very grateful.

From the time the Book of Mormon came off the Grandin Press in Palmyra, New York, in 1830—177 years ago—there have been more than 133 million copies distributed around the world, and it has been published in 106 languages with more to come.

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The introduction to the Book of Mormon contains this declaration by the Prophet Joseph Smith: “I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.”

I searched in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the definition of key words relating to the Prophet Joseph’s statement about the Book of Mormon: *abide*, *abiding*, and *precept*. Of the more than twenty definitions of the words, the following seem to relate most specifically to what we are discussing today:

*Precept* means “a general command or injunction; an instruction, direction, or rule for action or conduct; [especially] an injunction as to moral conduct; a maxim. Most commonly applied to divine commands.”<sup>1</sup>

*Abide* means “to stand firm by, hold to, remain true to.”<sup>2</sup>

*Abiding* means “enduring, standing firm” and, with relation to *law-abiding* (or *precept-abiding*), “adhering to the law”<sup>3</sup> (or precepts).

The Book of Mormon is filled with precepts—directions, rules, and commandments—that if applied in our lives will help draw us closer to God than the precepts we will find in any other book.

I submit that anyone who reads the Book of Mormon and receives a testimony of its truthfulness by the power of the Holy Ghost will be motivated to live a life more consistent with the teachings of the Lord

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Jesus Christ. He or she will become a better person. The Book of Mormon is action oriented. It is motivational. As long as the Spirit continues to strive with such individuals, their consciences will not let them be completely at peace until they improve their lives. Abiding by the precepts, teachings, and commandments taught so clearly in its pages will help a person proximately in this life and ultimately in the life to come. As a result, I resonate positively to the theme of this symposium: “Living the Book of Mormon: ‘Abiding by Its Precepts.’”

#### A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE

Personally, I owe much to the Book of Mormon. To illustrate, permit me to share a simple and yet profound personal experience which I had almost sixty years ago while serving as a newly called missionary in Mexico. In those days, an elder’s call to a second-language mission was for two and a half years—allowing an extra six months to work on the language since there was no LTM (Language Training Mission) or MTC (Missionary Training Center) to accelerate language preparation.

After just two months in the field, I was assigned to serve in the beautiful city of Cuernavaca, Morelos, with my senior companion, Elder Bradshaw, who had been in the field just one month longer than I. We were both struggling to unravel what people were saying. They spoke so rapidly that what we heard was like one long, continuous word. Understanding was one thing, but being able to express ourselves was yet another. We were struggling, working, and praying for help to become more competent and comfortable with the language and the message.

We had been out all day, attempting with our very limited Spanish to find someone who would listen to what we had to say. No one had responded. Discouraged and in a gloomy rain, we returned to our apartment, located immediately across the street from the largest Catholic church in the city. There, tacked to the door, we found a note which informed us that as “Mormons” we were not welcome in that city and that for our own safety we should leave as soon as possible.

I went in and slumped down, sitting on the side of my bed. A flood of depressing thoughts and questions went through my mind—what was I doing so far away from home? Even though we had a very

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important message, no one wanted to hear it, and besides, they spoke a language I was just beginning to speak and understand. We weren't even welcome. Rather than wasting my time here, wouldn't it be better if I were back at the university or home helping Dad on the farm?

I had my triple combination in my hands, and it fell open to Alma chapter 29. The first verses met my gaze, and I read: "O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people! Yea, I would declare unto every soul, as with the voice of thunder [*especially to those inhospitable folks who had written that note!*] repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth." That was exactly how I felt! Then my eyes fell upon these words: "But behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; for I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me" (Alma 29:1-3).

That was all it took. Then and there, I decided I really *ought to be content with the things the Lord had allotted to me*. From that moment on, I was never discouraged or homesick again. The Book of Mormon's message had changed me for the better—not only for my mission but in many situations in my life since. My whole outlook changed. I committed to being grateful and *content with the things the Lord has allotted to me*.

A few days later, things in our missionary lives began to look up. We met the Jesús Franco family. They listened, and the messages of the gospel and the Book of Mormon touched their hearts. The whole family was baptized. Brother Franco eventually became the branch president, and years later he was ordained to be the first patriarch in their newly created stake. Since then, the message of the Book of Mormon has changed the hearts of many people in Cuernavaca, Morelos, where there are now multiple stakes. That area is the headquarters for one of the newest established missions in the Church.

In August 2005, President Gordon B. Hinckley issued the challenge to all members of the Church to read the Book of Mormon before the end of the year. Near the end of December, several members of the Church were on a Delta Airlines flight returning from their business trips to the East and obviously were attempting to meet the

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goal of finishing their reading of the Book of Mormon before midnight on New Year's Eve. A flight attendant passed by one of them and said, "I don't know what it is that you all are reading, but those other guys back there are ahead of you."

Now, if we can conservatively assume that just 25 percent of the members of the Church, or one out of four, met President Hinckley's challenge and read the Book of Mormon, that would mean approximately three million members of the Church fulfilled the goal. Susan Easton Black's careful research calculated there are 3,925 references to the Savior in the Book of Mormon. That means on average there is a reference to the Lord every 1.7 verses.<sup>4</sup> If three million members fulfilled the reading assignment, then as a Church we were exposed to about twelve billion references to the Savior, His teachings, His personal ministry, and His revelations to His New World prophets in that six-month period. That could only be a plus to the Church and to the reinforcement in the minds of members that the Book of Mormon is literally another witness that Jesus is the Christ.

## PRESIDENT BENSON'S EMPHASIS

In President Ezra Taft Benson's first general conference address given after he was sustained as President of the Church in 1986, I was impressed with the emphasis he placed on the Book of Mormon. He said: "There is a book we need to study daily, both as individuals and as families, namely the Book of Mormon. I love that book. It is the book that will get a person nearer to God by abiding by its precepts than any other book. (See Book of Mormon, Introduction.) President [Marion G.] Romney recommended studying it half an hour each day. I commend that practice to you. I've always enjoyed reading the scriptures and do so on a daily basis individually and with my beloved wife."<sup>5</sup>

Near the end of his address he mentioned, "The Lord inspired His servant Lorenzo Snow to reemphasize the principle of tithing to redeem the Church from financial bondage. In those days the General Authorities took that message to the members of the Church. Now, in our day, the Lord has revealed the need to reemphasize the Book of Mormon to get the Church and all the children of Zion out from under condemnation—the scourge and judgment. (See D&C 84:54–58.) This

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message must be carried to the members of the Church throughout the world.”<sup>6</sup>

I thought it likely that in President Benson’s next conference address he might place emphasis on the Doctrine and Covenants or on the New Testament. But what did he do? He gave another powerful address on the Book of Mormon. We should read that address again and again. In it he said: “My beloved brethren and sisters, today I would like to speak about one of the most significant gifts given to the world in modern times. The gift I am thinking of is more important than any of the inventions that have come out of the industrial and technological revolutions. This is a gift of greater value to mankind than even the many wonderful advances we have seen in modern medicine. It is of greater worth to mankind than the development of flight or space travel. I speak of the gift of the Book of Mormon.”<sup>7</sup>

He went on to say: “In 1832, as some early missionaries returned from their fields of labor, the Lord reproved them for treating the Book of Mormon lightly. As a result of that attitude, he said, their minds had been darkened. Not only had treating this sacred book lightly brought a loss of light to themselves, it had also brought the whole Church under condemnation, even all the children of Zion. And then the Lord said, ‘And they shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon’ (D&C 84:54–57).”

He then asked, “Has the fact that we have had the Book of Mormon with us for over a century and a half made it seem less significant to us today?”<sup>8</sup> And he clarified: “The Book of Mormon is . . . the keystone of the doctrine of the Resurrection. . . . The Lord Himself has stated that the Book of Mormon contains the ‘fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ’ (D&C 20:9). That does not mean it contains every teaching, every doctrine ever revealed. Rather, it means that in the Book of Mormon we will find the fulness of those doctrines required for our salvation.”<sup>9</sup>

We have the book. We are also under condemnation if we do not take it seriously and do all we personally can to apply literally in our lives those precepts contained in the Book of Mormon. We must do this if we are to achieve our ultimate goal of salvation and exaltation.

We live in a world in which we witness much of the “carnal,

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sensual, and devilish” nature of so many (Alma 42:10). The media is awash with immoral and violent images. Conflicts and bloodshed are common throughout the world. Christianity is being attacked from all sides. Abortion has depreciated the value of life. Traditional marriage and the family are being attacked on many fronts. Heinous sexual transgressions occur, and many of them are condoned by a public devoid of conscience. War, poverty, genocide, and starvation plague millions around the world. The list could go on and on.

The Book of Mormon has come to us at a critical time in this world’s existence. We need all the help we can get on a personal and worldwide scale. This sacred record already helps millions at the deepest level of our personal, practical needs, and I hope in the future its influence will be greatly expanded.

## VALUE TO MEMBERS TODAY

I tried an experiment. I know what the Book of Mormon means to me in my life. I decided that it would be interesting to conduct an informal poll. So I requested that more than one hundred member friends and acquaintances respond to a simple questionnaire: “Please indicate at least one of the scriptures, doctrines, teachings, or experiences you have had with the Book of Mormon that you feel has helped you draw closer to the Lord or to have improved your life.”

The responses were enlightening to me for a variety of reasons. There was such a wide diversity in the verses or portions of the Book of Mormon that have had a positive impact in the lives of readers. Their responses came from expected and unexpected areas of the book. It was as though a person could be moved or affected at a life-changing level from something on almost any page in the Book of Mormon.

One of the respondents and her husband had a severe economic disaster, potential loss of their home, and a family member with a life-threatening disease. With permission, I share some of what she wrote of her experience with Mosiah 7:32–33, where she read, “And now, behold, the promise of the Lord is fulfilled, and ye are smitten and afflicted.” This family surely was smitten and afflicted. She read on: “But if ye will turn to the Lord with full purpose of heart, and put your trust in him, and serve him with all diligence of mind, if ye do this, he

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will, according to his own will and pleasure, deliver you out of bondage.” She wrote:

That scripture has sustained me during one of the lowest points of my life, when things seemed to come crushing in on us. Because of the promise in verse 32, I “turned to the Lord with full purpose of heart,” with absolute confidence, and, unconditionally, I “put my trust in him” and tried to serve him with “all diligence of mind” and with all my heart and every fiber of my being. I relied on the hope that “if ye do this, he will, according to his own will and pleasure, deliver you out of bondage.”

I have felt and seen the fulfillment of this promise, because I have felt of His love for us and received the knowledge that He is *always* there. I love the Lord with all my heart, and I will be forever a debtor, not only for delivering us out of our bondage, but primarily for His infinite Atonement. This is my testimony.

A sister whose husband walked out on their temple marriage for another woman, leaving her and their children, wrote about her experience with Nephi’s soliloquy in 2 Nephi 4:15–35:

Each time I read it, the Spirit washes over me and I come away feeling my courage refreshed and my commitment renewed. When I first read this, I felt that I had been heard—not just by our Heavenly Father and Jesus—but somehow, I felt that Nephi knew my heart and my feelings. I suppose that the comfort I receive from reading his words is much like the comfort he describes in reading the words of Isaiah. . . . Each time I read this passage, I realize that everyone struggles—even prophets. I see his example of how to pick yourself up out of the mire of self-pity and to throw yourself into self-improvement. I come away with a desire to be great like Nephi was.

She went on to mention her experience with a verse, 2 Nephi 2:2, which reads, “Nevertheless, Jacob, my first-born in the wilderness, thou

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knowest the greatness of God; *and he shall consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain*" (emphasis added). She wrote:

My mother-in-law brought this to my attention. She had gone through a serious illness for which she was hospitalized. She said one day in the early morning hours she awoke and couldn't sleep. She had a bad feeling and wanted some comfort. She found the copy of the Book of Mormon in her room and flipped it open to read. This verse came to her, and she realized that there must surely be something important for her to learn and that it would be for her gain, just as Jacob's afflictions were to him. She shared this with me because it was the summer when my divorce from her son was happening, and I was truly wondering, "Why me?" "Why this?" "Why now?" and so on. This scripture brought such indescribable peace to my soul. I was led to remember and recognize that Heavenly Father knows me. He knows my trials and consecrates them specifically for my gain. I got a sense of holiness about them. It's not always easy to think of trials in that way, but it always helps when I do.

One of the responses came from a distinguished scientist who had been trained in physics and chemistry at the University of Utah, under the tutelage of Dr. Henry B. Eyring. He then went to the East, where he worked for a leading corporation and became responsible for the work of more than two hundred PhD-level research scientists. He wrote:

In my early life as a budding scientist, I was constantly challenged by my nonmember colleagues with what they conceived to be the conflicts between science and religion. I had a hard time explaining to them why my scientific training strengthened my belief and why their training destroyed theirs. On several occasions well-known scientists expressed to me privately a desire to believe as I did but professed that their intellectual and cultural upbringings were insurmountable barriers. I found it difficult to explain in scientific terms why I had a testimony of

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the gospel and they did not, so I often resorted to citing evidence of the miracles of life and the majesty of the underlying laws of chemistry and physics. These citations proved to be interesting but insufficient to satisfy either me or my fellow scientists. Somehow the key to true belief was missing.

Then one day I came upon these words of the Lord, recorded by Moroni in Ether 4:13–14: "Come unto me, O ye Gentiles, and I will show unto you the greater things, the knowledge which is hid up because of unbelief."

This logically led to the question—unbelief in what? Unbelief in what I had told them? Unbelief in the temporal evidences supporting the scriptures? No, much more than that, as is made clear in the next verse:

"Come, unto me, O ye house of Israel, and it shall be made manifest unto you how great things the Father hath laid up for you, from the foundation of the world; and it hath not come unto you, because of unbelief."

Here was the key! The starting point for a testimony of the gospel is the first principle of the gospel, "faith in the Lord Jesus Christ." This principle is as inviolate as the law of gravity. Defy it and the result is predictable—darkness and unbelief. Follow it and that knowledge hid by unbelief will be revealed.

What he learned from the Book of Mormon helped sustain him and helped him achieve success in his profession, in his family, and in many significant Church callings.

Of the dozens of meaningful responses, here is just one more from a returned mission president about how as a youth he received a confirmation from the Spirit:

The passage that stands out in my experience is 3 Nephi 17, especially verses 13–22. It was as a teenager that I first read the entire Book of Mormon and prayed to receive a testimony. While I was reading this passage, the Spirit witnessed to me that this experience of the Savior with the Nephite people actually happened and was so real that I felt that I was present. I also realized that the reason what happened could not be

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recorded was that you had to feel it more than hear or see it. I felt that experience and have felt the witness of the Spirit in much the same way each time I have read the Book of Mormon ever since.

The Book of Mormon teaches powerfully, covering a broad range of precepts and doctrines. A presentation such as this can include only a few of a multitude of helpful precepts and doctrines from the Book of Mormon that can help us draw nearer to God. I would like to mention five particular areas.

*1. Doctrines Resolving the Question “How Are We Saved?”*

The Book of Mormon provides us with motivational precepts that help us draw nearer to God. We need to recognize that the Book of Mormon provides any serious student with monumental cognitive, intellectual, and rational insights that provide answers to many of the age-old theological debates—for example, the significant theological question “How are we saved?”

Different answers to this question have caused much dissension and bloodshed over the centuries among those who consider themselves to be Christian. Vestiges of the conflict between Catholics and Protestants exist even to this day in various parts of the world.

The Roman Catholics have essentially taught that for man to be saved, God’s saving grace is communicated to man exclusively through the “good offices” of the authorized church that include the sacraments (ordinances) rightly administered by their clergy.

In contrast, Martin Luther, along with others interested in reform, protested against the position that salvation came through the priests, sacraments, indulgences, and “good offices,” or works, of the church. He believed and taught that no one stood between a person and the Lord, that every man was his own priest. Of the Apostle Paul’s epistles, Luther’s favorite was that to the Galatians, where we read, “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law” (Galatians 2:16). Dr. W. Graham Scroggie stated: “Galatians was the

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battle axe which Luther brought down with terrific and telling force upon the helmets of his foes [in the Catholic Church].”<sup>10</sup>

Regarding this Protestant doctrine of justification by faith, Paul Tillich wrote that it “has divided the old unity of Christendom; has torn asunder Europe, and especially Germany; has made innumerable martyrs; has kindled the bloodiest and most terrible wars of the past; and has deeply affected European history and with it the history of humanity.”<sup>11</sup>

How can a person return to the presence of God justified, cleansed, becoming an heir to the highest blessings God has promised to the faithful? Does this come primarily through the authority of the Catholic Church, its priesthood, and the “good offices,” or as the Protestants believe, is it a gift that comes strictly as a result of faith and grace? The differences between the Catholic and Protestant theologies as to how we are saved are yet wide and deep. Never could these polar positions be reconciled without the light of additional revelation.

Fortunately, the revelations of Prophet Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon shed light on this universally divisive question “How are we saved?” For that we should be eternally grateful.

In a most intellectually satisfying way, the Book of Mormon brings together in just one verse the polar differences that have divided Christianity for centuries. Nephi taught: “For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that *it is by grace that we are saved*, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23; emphasis added).

Yes, we are saved by the grace of God and do not “earn” salvation, regardless of how many good works we may do. But Nephi included that very important clause: “after all we can do.” Our good works, or “all we can do,” demonstrate that we are willing to work for and receive the salvation that is offered to us by divine grace.

King Benjamin emphasized the relative position of grace and works in his well known, moving discourse: “I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole

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souls [that is, do all the good works] yet ye would be unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:21).

Even if we served Him with all our whole souls, we would still receive through grace more than we ever could earn. As this doctrine of salvation by grace—so clearly taught in the Book of Mormon—is better understood by Church members, we may observe greater evidences of humility and have fewer problems of reverence in sacrament meetings. We may sing with even more feeling, “I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me.”<sup>12</sup>

In our teaching, perhaps we should place less emphasis on the idea that we “work out [our] own salvation” (Philippians 2:12; Mormon 9:27) because that is impossible for a human being to do through his own efforts without receiving God’s grace. Thus, our position rationally allows us to agree in part with the emphasis the Catholics place on the importance of priesthood authority and the sacraments (ordinances) of the church *rightly* administered.

At the same time, we agree with the Protestants that salvation (and even exaltation) comes to us by grace as a gift from a loving and merciful Heavenly Father. We can, and must, emphasize the importance of grace and works—or obedience to all the commandments—so that “after all we can do,” we demonstrate we are willing to receive the blessed gift of salvation by grace and thereby be privileged to return to the presence of our Heavenly Father.

## 2. *Dangers Growing from the Sin of Pride*

Repeatedly, the Book of Mormon cautions us to avoid the sin of pride. The Book of Mormon describes several cycles in which the Church, after achieving prosperity, was brought down by the pride of its members. President Benson, C. S. Lewis, and others have said that pride is “the universal sin.”<sup>13</sup> That means *every one* of us, to one degree or another, suffers from the problem. No one of us is completely free from its effects, but we must do all in our power to overcome its influence in our lives. No book teaches us more effectively than the Book of Mormon about the need to avoid or overcome the negative influence of pride in our lives.

Times of relative prosperity, such as those we are experiencing in

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our country at this time, are periods of great danger. In 3 Nephi we read a passage that we could easily liken unto our relatively prosperous time:

And they began again to prosper and to wax great. . . .

And now there was nothing in all the land to hinder the people from prospering continually, except they should fall into transgression. . . .

And it came to pass that there were many cities built anew, and there were many old cities repaired.

And there were many highways cast up, . . . which led from city to city, and from land to land. . . .

But it came to pass . . . there began to be some disputings among the people; and some were lifted up unto pride and boastings because of their exceedingly great riches, yea, even unto great persecutions;

For there were many merchants in the land, and also many lawyers, and many officers.

And the people began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning; yea, some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive great learning because of their riches.

Some were lifted up in pride. . . .

And thus there became a great inequality in all the land, insomuch that *the church began to be broken up*. (3 Nephi 6:4–5, 7–8, 10–14; emphasis added)

It appears that prosperity and peace were destroyed by the disruptive effects of human pride no less than thirty times throughout the Book of Mormon.

Opportunities for education and training, our relative prosperity, and a stratified society make overcoming inappropriate pride a genuine challenge. Our cup of advantages is very full, and as the English proverb states, "A full cup must be carried steadily."

Just after finishing graduate school, I was visiting with an acquaintance. He was much older—probably twice my age. Earlier in his career he had gone back east to a major university and received some graduate training from a few of the scholars in his field. In the course of our

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conversation, my friend criticized leaders of the Church and some of the policies that he felt should long since have been changed. Then he said the words that still ring in my memory; “You see, Joe, *I* am an intellectual.”

In my experience, the genuine intellectual does not need to announce it. Since that time, my friend spent his life on the fringe, speaking, writing, and associating with those who felt they knew more than designated Church leaders. His criticism negatively affected his wife, their children, and their grandchildren.

In my mind, he seemed to become an incarnation of the attitude Nephi described: “O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish. But to be learned is good *if they hearken unto the counsels of God*” (2 Nephi 9:28–29; emphasis added).

Therein lies a challenge for all of us who have received the opportunities of higher education to avoid becoming trapped by the sin of pride. Succumbing to it could cause us to perish spiritually.

Robert J. McCracken wrote:

If we make a listing of our sins, . . . [pride] is the one that heads the list, breeds all the rest, and does more to estrange us from our neighbors or from God than any evil we can commit. . . .

In this aspect, it is not only the worst of the seven deadly sins; it is the parent sin, the one that leads to every other, the sin from which no one is free. . . .

Pride of rank—the delight taken in status, recognition, honors, in being at the head of the table, the top of the line. . . . Pride of intellect—the arrogance that thinks it knows more than it does, forgets the finiteness of the human mind, talks in terms of morons, smiles at the cultural crudity of contemporaries, and needs to be told what Madame Foch said to one of her sons who was boasting about a school prize: “Cleverness

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which has to be mentioned does not exist." Pride of power—the passion to achieve it, to wield more and more of it, to feel superior to others, to give orders with a strident voice and move men about like pawns on a chessboard.<sup>14</sup>

Pride creeps up on us because as human beings we have a remarkable capacity to fall under its influence even when we think we are in the safest of religious settings. A Carthusian monk who was explaining his monastic order to an inquirer said: "When it comes to good works, we don't match the Benedictines; as to preaching, we are not in a class with the Dominicans; the Jesuits are away ahead of us in learning; but in the matter of humility, we're tops."<sup>15</sup>

Even in Church callings there can be danger. We may fall into the trap of aspiring to some position or another. That would be almost like praying, "Father, I want to serve. Use me—in an executive position!" Remember that even the greatest of all—our Savior, Redeemer, and the Creator of worlds without number—set the example of humble service by kneeling and washing His disciples' feet (see John 13). Where we serve does not matter. How we serve matters a great deal.

Many become desirous of being in a position of honor or recognition. I think of the example Nephi set for all of us in terms of humility and not seeking positions of honor. When the Savior appeared to the Nephites at Bountiful, He invited the multitude to come forward one by one and feel His side and the nail prints in His hands and feet so they could receive a tangible witness that He was literally resurrected. He then asked for Nephi, who had not elbowed his way to the front of the group. Where was Nephi? We read: "And it came to pass that he spake unto Nephi (for Nephi was among the multitude) and he commanded him that he should come forth. And Nephi arose and went forth, and bowed himself before the Lord and did kiss his feet" (3 Nephi II:18–19).

It is always better to be invited to take a place of recognition or honor rather than to assume that we should be there. Book of Mormon precepts teach that we can become overly concerned about organizations we belong to, which side of town we live on, the size of our home, how much money we have, what race or nationality we are, what kind of

car we drive, what church we belong to, how much education we have been privileged to acquire, what we wear, and so on. How many times do we read in the Book of Mormon about the spiritually negative consequences of wearing “fine-twined linen” and “costly apparel”? (see Jacob 2:13; Alma 4:6; 5:53). We should place our concern on simple, less worldly things. In our mercenary and materialistic society, we could also learn from what Henry David Thoreau said: “My greatest skill has been to want but little.”<sup>16</sup> Precepts taught in the Book of Mormon, more than in any other book, help us overcome these spiritually destructive tendencies of pride.

### 3. *The Need to Defend Values, Even to Bloodshed If Necessary*

President Benson clearly indicated that one of the reasons we must focus on the Book of Mormon is that “it was written for our day. The Nephites never had the book; neither did the Lamanites of ancient times. It was meant for us. Mormon wrote near the end of the Nephite civilization. Under the inspiration of God, who sees all things from the beginning, he abridged centuries of records, choosing the stories, speeches, and events that would be most helpful to us.”<sup>17</sup>

The prophet Mormon abridged many of the Nephite records. With divine guidance, he selected and included those portions of the records that would be most valuable to us in our day.

Frankly, in some of my readings of the Book of Mormon, I would get a little tired of the many pages on the wars between the Nephites and the Lamanites. However, the last time Barbara and I read the Book of Mormon, those turbulent times had more relevance for me in our turbulent, war-torn world today.

Approximately one out of every ten pages of the Book of Mormon deals with the life and times of Captain Moroni, which we read in Alma chapters 43–63. Basically, these were times of war. They were times when enemies arose who wanted to kill those who followed Christ and to wipe them from the face of the earth. There are those in the world today who would like to do the same to us.

Captain Moroni was inspired to know that values of inestimable worth must be preserved, even if it means fighting a defensive war to protect them—even if it means giving up our very lives: “Inasmuch as

ye are not guilty of the first offense, neither the second, *ye shall not suffer yourselves to be slain by the hands of your enemies*. And again, the Lord has said that: *Ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed*. Therefore for this cause were the Nephites contending with the Lamanites, to defend themselves, and their families, and their lands, their country, and their rights, and their religion" (Alma 43:46–47; emphasis added).

We live in a time of prophesied wars and rumors of war. Moroni clearly saw our day and prophesied, "And there shall also be heard of wars, rumors of wars, and earthquakes in divers places" (Mormon 8:30). The Lord, through the Prophet Joseph in our dispensation, made it very clear that "in that day shall be heard of wars and rumors of wars, and the whole earth shall be in commotion, and men's hearts shall fail them" (D&C 45:26). The Lord also said, "And thus, with the sword and by bloodshed the inhabitants of the earth shall mourn; and with famine, and plague, and earthquake, and the thunder of heaven, and the fierce and vivid lightning also, . . . until the consumption decreed hath made a full end of all nations" (D&C 87:6).

The messages contained in the Book of Mormon help prepare our minds and hearts to cope with an era when wars are being fought in many parts of the world. We learn that our challenges are to stand in holy places and to remain firm in defending those values which are more precious than our mortal lives themselves.

#### 4. *The Need for Heroes Today*

The most powerful precepts are taught through the exemplary lives of righteous, capable, and heroic individuals. No other volume of scripture provides us with so many exemplary lives after which to pattern our own as does the Book of Mormon. Example, for good or ill, is the most powerful of precepts. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Who you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you're saying."

For many, we live in a world lacking genuine heroes. It has been noted that we live in "a cynical age [which] now accepts the tarnished coin of celebrity in place of heroic virtue."<sup>18</sup> Our young people today need heroes who go beyond the popular rock stars, musicians, comedians, great athletes, the rich, and the famous. They, and all of us, need to come to know of heroic characters such as those in the Book of

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Mormon, whose influence will live long after the applause for those who are currently popular has faded away.

Retired brigadier general Joe Foss, a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor, said, “America needs a new generation of heroes, . . . people who are ruled by a conscience that doesn’t take the Ten Commandments lightly, who have a fundamental reverence for their Creator, and a respect for the people and things He has created.”<sup>19</sup>

Anyone who has really studied the Book of Mormon will never lack for heroes to emulate. In fact, a book entitled *Heroes from the Book of Mormon* highlights many individuals’ lives, including Nephi, Jacob, Enos, King Benjamin, Abinadi, the two Almas, Captain Moroni, Mormon, and Mormon’s son, Moroni.

In this book, Elder Russell M. Nelson summarizes Nephi, the son of father Lehi, as one of the genuine heroes of the Book of Mormon: “Nephi was a multifaceted genius. Endowed with great physical stature, he was a prophet, teacher, ruler, colonizer, builder, craftsman, scholar, writer, poet, military leader, and father of nations. Nephi had a sincere desire to know the mysteries of God. He became a special witness and trusted prophet of the Lord.”<sup>20</sup>

And Mormon, describing Captain Moroni, recorded, “If all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men” (Alma 48:17).

Of the prophet Moroni, who delivered the plates to the Prophet Joseph, President Gordon B. Hinckley wrote, “Of all the characters who walk the pages of the Book of Mormon, none stands a greater hero, save Jesus only, than does Moroni, son of Mormon.”<sup>21</sup>

### 5. *Our Ultimate Objective: Come unto Christ and Be Perfected in Him*

I remember years ago being impressed by a statement made by Truman G. Madsen: “To be or not to be?’ That is *not* the question.” The reality is that a part of us is coeternal with God. We are, we live, and we *do* exist. As Brother Madsen went on to say: “What *is* the question? The question is not one of being, but of becoming. ‘To become more

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or not to become more.' This is the question faced by each intelligence in our universe."<sup>22</sup>

What is our ultimate objective? What can we progress to become? What did the Savior mean when He included in the Sermon on the Mount the statement "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect"? (Matthew 5:48). Some scholars claim that when the Savior taught, He often used hyperbole, or exaggeration, to dramatize His demands.<sup>23</sup>

Such interpretations are not found in Elder James E. Talmage's *Jesus the Christ*. Elder Talmage notes, "Our Lord's admonition to men to become perfect, even as the Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48) cannot rationally be construed otherwise than as implying the possibility of such achievement."<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, in *Mormon Doctrine*, Elder Bruce R. McConkie indicates that "any being who becomes perfect—*even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect*' (Matt. 5:48), that is who has the kind and extent of perfection enjoyed by Deity—must be like God."<sup>25</sup>

So rather than interpreting the Lord's statement in Matthew 5:48 as exaggerated idealism or scriptural hyperbole, we should believe the Lord meant what He said. Our goal is to become perfect, even as our Father in Heaven is perfect. We will not achieve that end in mortality, but through the divine principle of eternal progression we can!

Many outside our faith consider such doctrine blasphemy, but the Book of Mormon helps to clarify the issue. When the Lord appeared in the Western Hemisphere, He reiterated much of the Sermon on the Mount, and in 3 Nephi 12:48 we read, "Therefore I would that ye should be perfect *even as I*, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect" (emphasis added).

Clearly, to achieve such a lofty goal, we need to change our hearts. We need to lose the disposition to do evil, like those who listened to King Benjamin's address (see Mosiah 5:1–2). We need to become the kind of people the Lord intends us to become, as indicated in that rhetorical question He asked of His Nephite disciples: "Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, *even as I am*" (3 Nephi 27:27; emphasis added). In other words, we need to do more

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than just go through the motions and do the works, but literally to *become* as He is.

In a powerful general conference address entitled “The Challenge to Become,” Elder Dallin H. Oaks stressed that more is required than just doing a quantity of good works. We must literally be changed—born again. We must *become* what our Heavenly Father desires us to become.<sup>26</sup> Elder Oaks then used a parable to make his point:

A wealthy father knew that if he were to bestow his wealth upon a child who had not yet developed the needed wisdom and stature, the inheritance would probably be wasted. The father said to his child:

“All that I have I desire to give you—not only my wealth, but also my position and standing among men. That which I *have* I can easily give you, but that which I *am* you must obtain for yourself. You will qualify for your inheritance by learning what I have learned and by living as I have lived. I will give you the laws and principles by which I have acquired my wisdom and stature. Follow my example, mastering as I have mastered, and you will become as I am, and all that I have will be yours.”<sup>27</sup>

To become like our Savior and Father in Heaven is the goal of every committed Latter-day Saint. The knowledge of such potential is motivational and makes each day of life more purposeful. That is an idea that merits much more time, effort, thought, and discussion—even a lifetime and on into the eternities.

More than any other book, the Book of Mormon invites us to come unto Christ. As Moroni wrote, “Come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God” (Moroni 10:32).

In the last verse of the Book of Mormon, Moroni records: “And now I bid unto all, farewell. I soon go to rest in the paradise of God, until my spirit and body shall again reunite, and I am brought forth triumphant through the air, to meet you before the *pleasing* bar of the great

Jehovah, the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead" (Moroni 10:34; emphasis added).

I am confident that if we abide by the precepts taught in the Book of Mormon, the meeting before that bar will be much more pleasing than if we don't. With President Brigham Young, "I feel like shouting Hallelujah, all the time, when I think that I ever knew Joseph Smith."<sup>28</sup> Through the inspiration he received, he translated and miraculously brought forth the Book of Mormon, which contains the precepts that can bring us nearer to God than any other book. Of that I am thoroughly convinced and eternally grateful.

#### NOTES

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27. Oaks, in Conference Report, October 2000, 41; or *Ensign*, November 2000, 32.
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