

Chapter Ten

THE JAREDITE JOURNEY

A Symbolic Reflection of Our Own Journey along the Covenant Path

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Most of the chapters in this book look at various aspects of the book of Ether through an academic lens. This chapter intentionally takes a different approach. In what follows, I aim to speak to believing Latter-day Saints, giving a devotional-theological reading of this significant text from the Book of Mormon. Indeed, given President Russell M. Nelson's recent emphasis on our "covenant path," the metaphor of the Jaredite journey to a promised land strikes me as especially timely. For non-Latter-day Saint readers who do not share my perspective on the text, I offer what follows as one example of how believing members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints engage with their scripture. Rather than forwarding a sustained argument in the traditional academic format, I will offer a series of brief devotional lessons tied to key moments in the Jaredite story in the hope that readers will find greater motivation to press forward in faith on the covenant path today.

By the time students complete their study of the Book of Mormon up through the books of 4 Nephi and Mormon, they have worked through hundreds of pages of struggles and successes. They have seen nearly one thousand years of personal and cultural histories culminate in the ultimate downfall of the Nephite nation. At that point, readers are invited to start over and begin yet another journey from the Old World to the promised land. This story of the Jaredites predates Lehi by many centuries,¹ covers more years, and in some ways surpasses the volume and intensity of conflict found in the Nephite/Lamanite story.²

The Lord seems to be invoking the law of witnesses³ by having Moroni include this abridgment in the record. The parallels between Lehi's migration and that of Jared and his brother are numerous. Both began in a land filled with people who had become very wicked and were facing negative consequences for poor choices. The Lord commanded both Lehi and Jared to flee into the wilderness without much initial direction or orientation. He guided both groups through many years of struggle over great distances filled with peril. They both arrived at the seashore and had to build a boat or barges to cross the great waters. The ocean crossing was long and difficult. Once they arrived in the promised land, they rejoiced, gave thanks to the Lord, and lived in relative peace until the first generation passed away. From that point forward, divisions and loyalties, dissensions and conversions, war and peace, scattering and gathering, captivity and deliverance, and secret combinations and prophecy all began to run their course toward a tragic ending to both stories. The book of Ether provides an additional witness to us in the latter days of what happens when a favored people of the Lord reject his covenants and promised blessings in favor of seeking to build up their own kingdoms and power, fueled by pride, wickedness, and secret combinations.

Even though the book of Ether provides us with numerous principles that are relevant and meaningful for our own lives today, many less motivated readers tend to disengage with much of this book for a variety of reasons. The multiple similarities with the Nephite story, combined with yet another tragic ending, can feel repetitious, predictable, or even laborious for some. The fact that its fifteen chapters compose only 6 percent of the entire Book of Mormon also makes it easy to overlook, even though

those thirty-two pages cover many more years than the Nephite/Lamanite story does.⁴ Moroni’s truncated writing style when covering so many years of history can also be less engaging for some to follow. A reader who skips or skims the book of Ether will miss out on some of the Book of Mormon’s most relevant and powerful lessons. It is therefore important for teachers and students to find fresh approaches and dig deeper to find greater meaning and unlock applicable truths that can be found in this final, compressed narrative section of the Book of Mormon.

The book of Ether was abridged and written exclusively for us in the latter days. Moroni overtly informed us, “I speak unto you as if ye were present and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing” (Mormon 8:35). That clarity of focus on us, his intended audience, must have had a guiding impact on the decisions he made while recording the Jaredite story and strategically inserting his own editorial commentary. Knowing that the Lord prepared Moroni by showing him our day in vision indicates the importance of good information leading to good inspiration. Moroni was writing directly for *our* benefit today since he had no friendly contemporary audience to benefit from his work (see Mormon 8:3; Moroni 1:3–4). All of this perspective gives us a powerful lens to use when approaching this book and trying to find applicable principles for our own lives today.

As we analyze the first six chapters of the book of Ether, we will first seek to understand what is happening in a historical context and then seek to find our own story symbolically reflected in the lives and experiences of these people who predate us by thousands of years.

PROMISED LAND OR A PROMISED CHILD OF GOD

Let’s begin with a simple test question:

The purpose of our Heavenly Father’s plan is to help us _____.

- A. get somewhere
- or
- B. become something

As most readers will quickly realize, neither (a) nor (b) is the correct answer in isolation. In fact, the question is inherently unfair because the right answer is actually missing. Latter-day Saint theology demonstrates the absolute necessity of both answers.

If the only correct answer were (a), then Church members might ask, “Why did we leave God’s presence in the first place?” If the main goal of the plan of salvation is to return to heaven, what would necessitate *leaving* heaven to begin with? We already lived there, in an ideal environment with perfect parents. Apparently, location and proximal relationships do not guarantee ultimate happiness, or we would have never left.

Restoration doctrine responds to this logical difficulty of setting and location by adding answer (b)—God’s plan for our happiness is intended to help us *become* something. Our doctrine teaches us that we were willing to leave our perfect home and the presence of perfect parents to come down to a fallen earth with less-than-ideal circumstances and surroundings—all for an opportunity to receive a physical body, be tested, and work toward developing godly attributes and capacities. Those efforts to become more like God were intended not to permanently leave us out of heaven or indefinitely isolate us from God’s presence but rather to help us learn eternally important lessons that could only be gained in a fallen world, through our own mortal experiences.

Seeing the need for both (a) and (b) in our own lives today helps us see the Jaredite story as much more than an arduous physical journey for the Jaredites from Babel to a promised land. If getting to the New World had been the most important outcome to the story, an infinite God in Heaven could have miraculously transported them across the globe to their new home in an instant, but he did not. In a less dramatic way, he could have simplified their journey by having them go southward from Babel instead of northward (see Ether 1:42), thus decreasing the length of their land journey to the ocean, but he did not. God could have also provided ready-made barges for them, complete with provisions, lighting, and means to get adequate air for surviving the long voyage to the Americas, but he did not. What he did do was send his Son to guide them one step at a time on that journey. So it is with us: Jesus Christ wants to be the main character

in our pilgrimage today, just as he was the central figure in the journeys of Ether 1–6.

The Lord was doing much more than trying to help the Jaredites obtain a promised land. He was also molding them every step along their difficult way. And he is doing much more than trying to help us get into our version of the promised land, heaven: He is working to get heaven into us by molding us every step along our own journey through mortality. Biblical scholar N. T. Wright put it this way: “It is not we who go to heaven, it is heaven that comes to earth.”⁵ Our journeys on this earth are rooted just as much in who we are becoming as in where we are going. This means that in the Jaredite story as well as our own there will be times when God does not direct us down the path of greatest ease, but rather down a road where progress can only come when we are on our knees.⁶ When we recognize this principle throughout our journey, with all of its twists, turns, and setbacks, we will likely spend less time complaining that we have been forsaken or forgotten and gratefully acknowledge God’s shaping hand as his attributes and perfections are increasingly infused into his covenant children.

A LENS FOR OUR JOURNEY ALONG THE COVENANT PATH TODAY

Moroni began the Jaredite story at the great tower when the languages were confounded. This becomes a relatable symbol for us living in a world where the devil has a great chain to cover the earth in darkness (see Moses 7:26). Similar to other lists of genealogy in the scriptures,⁷ Moroni orients us with a series of son/father pairs. Ether 1:6 begins a long list of ancestors with the last person in the line, Ether himself. Thirty generations before Ether, we find Jared. That pedigree (vv. 6–32) forms the first half of a book-long chiasmic structure. In the rest of the book, Moroni tells the story of each of those thirty people, without skipping a single name or messing up the order one time, beginning now with Jared and ending with Ether.

RECOGNIZING AND USING SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS

At the outset of the story, some readers are perplexed by the fact that on three occasions Jared approaches his brother with a request for him to cry unto the Lord with a specific question (see Ether 1:34, 36, 38). Many have wondered why the brother of Jared so easily conformed to each request rather than insisting that Jared go and pray for himself. Based on what we learn about the brother of Jared in subsequent chapters, it is obvious that he has a powerful spiritual gift of faith and an ability to commune with God. Perhaps Jared recognized this, and rather than feeling threatened by it, he repeatedly invited his brother to use that unique gift in behalf of their family and friends. Jared demonstrated his own abilities in being able to ask the right questions at the right time, because God honored each request. Our own connection with heaven would likely be strengthened today if we followed these two brothers' examples of recognizing and using the spiritual gifts that God has uniquely given us and those around us.

LINE UPON LINE, HERE A LITTLE, THERE A LITTLE

The Jaredites' journey did not begin with a spontaneous departure into the wilderness. They embarked prepared. They did the required work of gathering flocks and seeds of every kind and getting their family and friends together along with needed provisions (see Ether 1:41). They all assumed they were leaving their homeland for good. They did not expect the Lord to do all of the work for them. They did what they could, trusting that he would fulfill his role by doing the things they could not do for themselves.

They likely had no idea how long and arduous the road ahead would be. The only instructions the Lord had given them was to go "into the valley which is northward. And there will I meet thee, and I will go before thee into a land which is choice above all the lands of the earth" (v. 42). What would have happened if the Lord had begun by giving them a five-hundred-page manual describing everything they would face and everywhere they would go along their path to the promised land? As we think back on our own lives today, most would agree that it is a loving God who gives us only the next step from point A to point B rather than showing us

every step from point A to point Z at the outset. That would be exhausting, overwhelming, and often demotivating.

ROUTES VERSUS DESTINATION

Moroni doesn't give us the exact route the Jaredites took from Babel to the ocean where they built the barges to cross over to the New World. If the land masses in the Old World were anything like they are today, the migrating Jaredites could have easily avoided inland seas on their way to the ocean. And yet they "did build barges, in which they did cross many waters" (Ether 2:6). The only explanation in the text for why they did not travel exclusively by land is that they were "being directed continually by the hand of the Lord" (v. 6). It's possible that the Lord wanted them to gain some experience in building barges before they would have to build vessels strong enough to survive an ocean crossing. In our own lives, we can trust in God, who knows the end from the beginning. He knows what preparations today will give us needed experience to fulfill more significant tasks that will come our way down the road.

After crossing these inland bodies of water, the Jaredites could have been tempted to say, "It is enough. We're out of danger here. This is a nice place. Let's make this our new home." C. S. Lewis summed up a similar temptation we face in our spiritual progression today when he observed, "The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and oppose an obstacle to our return to God. . . . Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home."⁸ And so "the Lord would not suffer that they should stop beyond the sea in the wilderness, but he would that they should come forth even unto the land of promise" (Ether 2:7), even though they had spent four seemingly contented years on the seashore (see v. 13).

The Lord chastened the brother of Jared for not calling upon the name of the Lord (v. 14). Had the brother of Jared failed to pray at all, or had he simply failed to ask the Lord for further directions regarding his will for these people? Based on other scripture stories and personal experiences, I suspect that the brother of Jared likely continued to offer prayers but that they lacked the power of real intent because the people had become content in their new surroundings. Perhaps they did not ask for further

directions because they already knew what the answer would be and they did not feel ready to take that step. Living below one's privileges is not a problem that was unique to the Jaredites on the seashore. How often do disciples today find themselves in a comfort zone and fail to ask the Lord if he has more that he wants to give or teach us?

THREE PROBLEMS

Once the Jaredites finished constructing the barges “according to the instructions of the Lord” (Ether 2:16), they noticed three major problems. The brother of Jared addressed all three issues in fervent prayer: “O Lord, in them there is no light; whither shall we steer? And also we shall perish, for in them we cannot breathe” (v. 19). The Lord began by giving him step-by-step instructions for how to get fresh air. Without delay, the brother of Jared acted on those instructions. He didn't insist that the Lord answer the other two questions before he followed the revelation given. Quickly acting on revelation we receive, as incomplete as it may seem, opens the door for additional inspiration. This part of the story also shows us the power of focusing our efforts on one thing at a time to avoid being overwhelmed by seeking to solve multiple tasks at the same time.⁹ The Lord began by helping them fix the most important problem, breathing. All of our problems today are not of equal importance. As he did for the brother of Jared, if we will ask him, the Lord will help us discover which problems need our immediate attention and which can be dealt with later.¹⁰

EMPOWERING AGENCY FOR GREATER GROWTH

After the brother of Jared followed all of the steps outlined by the Lord for obtaining sufficient air, he returned and meekly asked again about one of the other two unresolved issues—lighting the barges. The brother of Jared modeled a powerful example of how to meekly request divine aid from heaven when he said, “I have prepared the vessels . . . and behold there is no light in them. Behold, O Lord, wilt thou suffer that we shall cross this great water in darkness?” (Ether 2:22). Implied in that last question is a willingness to trust in whatever God decides to do, even if it means journeying in darkness. This was not a demand from one who felt entitled,

but a pattern to show us how we might also approach God in genuine meekness.

The Lord activated this prophet's agency and reversed the directional flow of instruction. Whereas he had given the brother of Jared step-by-step instructions on the first solution, he was now inviting him to be the one to give directives, to the Lord himself. He did this by asking, "*What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels?*" (v. 23). Note that the Lord did not say, "What are *you* going to do to solve this problem?" He basically asked, "How would you like *me* to solve this problem for you?"

There were at least two potential ways to get light into the barges that would not have required miraculous assistance. The Lord prohibited both of those options when he said, "Ye cannot have windows, for they will be dashed in pieces; neither shall ye take fire with you, for ye shall not go by the light of fire" (v. 23). This left the brother of Jared entirely dependent on God for the ultimate solution once he had put forth his own best efforts.

DON'T WORRY

The Lord addressed the third issue regarding how to steer the barges in a completely different way. He gave no instructions on how to fix this problem, nor did he ask for suggestions. He simply made it clear that there was nothing required of the brother of Jared. The Lord would take care of the steering problem through the winds and the waves (see Ether 2:24–25).

THREE ANSWER TYPES THEN AND NOW

This part of the Jaredite story is extremely applicable to our own stories today. The brother of Jared's experience preparing the barges reveals a pattern of three types of answers we can receive from God when seeking revelation or trying to solve problems:

1. Exact instructions (breathing)
2. Activation of agency (light)
3. Don't worry about it (steering)

Answers from the Lord do not always fit neatly into three categories, but these variations can help us make better sense of our own situations.

When we first see these three answer types, we may wish for all of our own requests to fall under the “Don’t worry about it—I’ll take care of it” category. We will have times when God responds this way to some of our questions or concerns. Those experiences, while merciful, require great faith on our part as we symbolically enter a rudderless barge and trustingly launch out into the deep. We believe that Jesus Christ will navigate us far better than if we were at the helm steering our own ship. Surrendering that level of control over our life’s direction allows the Lord to take us to the promised lands *he* intends for us, while shaping and refining our character along the way.

It would not be a good thing, however, if this were the only type of answer we ever received. Out of necessity, newborns and small children have everything done for them without much effort on their part. The older we get, the more the Lord can use the other two types of answers to help us develop and progress.

Our next instinctive preference might be to have the Lord answer most of our prayers by giving us step-by-step instructions for every problem we face. If that were always the case, however, life would begin to feel robotic. It would lose much of its interest and the excitement that comes from a sense of exploration and discovery. As children begin to grow, parents increasingly give more step-by-step instructions for how to accomplish certain tasks that were previously done for them by others. Eventually, there comes a time when wise parents do not give as many direct answers to every question. They empower their children to begin to exercise their own agency and learn from their own experience within certain parameters.

This principle was illustrated in a revelation to Joseph Smith and a small group of Saints in Jackson County, Missouri, in August of 1831. At that early stage of the Church’s development the Lord revealed, “It is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward” (Doctrine and Covenants 58:26). We are expected to be “anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of [our] own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness” (v. 27).

Consequently, there will be many times when we want the Lord to do something for us or to tell us exactly how to do it ourselves, but instead he will require us to work out certain parts of the solution. Progressively expecting more from a child and empowering him or her to use more agency is not a sign of a parent's decreasing concern and involvement but of a parent's love and trust in a developing child. The more spiritually mature we become, the more God can use various combinations of all three response types included in this Jaredite story to help us progress in our own journey.

THE CREATION OF LIGHT

Now that his barges were modified to allow the intake of fresh air and he was reassured that the Lord would take care of navigation, the brother of Jared could have quickly gathered sixteen rocks from the ground around him and placed them before the Lord. Rather than take the easiest path, he put forth significant effort to present his finest work to the Lord. He climbed a tall mountain, found ore, dug it out of the mountain, built a furnace hot enough to melt the rock, and presumably built tools required to work with the molten material and shape it into sixteen smooth, transparent stones (see Ether 3:1). Only then did he feel comfortable presenting his chosen solution to the Lord. Even though he felt inadequate, those sixteen stones represented his best thinking and diligent work. Because of this effort, he could approach the Lord with a higher degree of confidence when asking him to light the stones than if he had just gathered any random rocks on the ground or in a streambed.

We experience a similar phenomenon in our discipleship. For instance, if a teacher purposely spends only a few moments preparing a lesson right before class starts, any prayers for heaven's help will lack power. If on a different occasion, however, this teacher puts sufficient effort into preparing a lesson, she will be able to approach the Lord with faith and confidence, knowing she has done her part. Needing the Lord to touch our best, albeit inadequate, efforts applies to all aspects of our lives and discipleship. This process will bring greater light and success to our efforts with family relationships, schoolwork, careers, church callings, missionary efforts, temple

and family history work, and, most importantly, our efforts to progress on the covenant path.

The Lord never expects too much from us. He will never push us beyond our breaking point. He perfectly knows what our capacities are and what we need in order to stretch and grow to the next level. The brother of Jared was so capable that he did not need much additional help or instructions to find a great solution to his lighting problem. Few people today would know where to begin when seeking to make smooth transparent stones out of ore. If the brother of Jared had been less adept, the Lord would have given him whatever directives were necessary to establish the ideal jumping-off point. This is the point where the task is still doable but will require a leap of faith so that new capacities and abilities can be discovered and stretched. For instance, after telling the brother of Jared what not to use for lighting, the Lord could have told a less capable servant, “Climb to the top of that mountain and dig into the rock until you find ore. How can you use that ore to solve your lighting problem? Figure it out.” So it is with us. The Lord will never give us the “Use your agency” answer without also leading us to any needed resources or giving us the needed abilities to actually accomplish his purposes and rise to the next level of capacity and appropriate confidence in the process.

OUR PART, THE LORD’S PART

Despite his great efforts to make the sixteen stones, the brother of Jared clearly felt inadequate before the Lord. His prayer in Ether 3:2–5 is saturated with self-deprecation and apologies that appear in phrases such as “O Lord, . . . do not be angry with thy servant because of his weakness before thee; for we know that thou art holy and . . . we are unworthy before thee; . . . our natures have become evil continually. . . . Thou hast smitten us because of our iniquity.”¹¹

Few things expose our human frailties and weaknesses more than having to make an offering to God. Perhaps it is because this type of experience clearly reveals our own imperfections, precisely because they are more visible when set side by side with God’s perfection. The brother of Jared knew that God could have created a far better solution to the light problem. Even if the Lord had used transparent stones, his would have

been perfect, far better than the brother of Jared's. Even though he was told to come up with a solution and present it before the Lord, the brother of Jared still felt inadequate in making his request because of fallen nature and past sins, both individual and collective.

Moroni, the abridger of this story, also faced his fair share of self-doubt and serious feelings of inadequacy. Ironically, his struggle would be rooted in a comparison between his own writing ability and that of this very prophet who felt so inadequate for a different reason (see Ether 12:23–27). When the greatest scripture characters can all feel this deep sense of insufficiency, it should not surprise any of us today when we feel less than capable to face the tasks and callings that lie in our path. The same God who helped the brother of Jared and Moroni overcome their self-doubts will also help us move forward in faith today as we focus more on him and less on our lack of knowledge and perceived limitations.

Additional lessons come to us from seeing how both of these great prophets struggled. Nobody would question the fact that God could have done a better job of building and lighting the barges himself. He could have also done a far better job than Moroni at abridging and writing the Jaredites' stories on plates. For that matter, he could have translated the book into English far better than a farm boy from 1800s upstate New York. He could also give every talk and lesson in church, do all of the ministering, and give every blessing infinitely better than any of us do those things today. Once again, if a major purpose of the plan of salvation is to help *us* become more like Christ, that means he is going to require us to do all of those things, not so they are done perfectly, but so we can learn and grow from those experiences.

Even if the brother of Jared had been able to perfectly form sixteen transparent stones, they still would have been just that—smooth, transparent stones, not light sources. One of the greatest miracles repeatedly performed by God is his ability to take our less-than-perfect attempts and make them shine.

One of the most important lessons we could personally apply from this experience with the brother of Jared is a firm acknowledgment of faith in Christ. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles stated, “Surely God, as well as the reader, feels something very striking in

the childlike innocence and fervor of this man's faith. '*Behold, O Lord, thou canst do this*' (Ether 3:5). Perhaps there is no more powerful, single line of faith spoken by man in scripture. . . . However uncertain the prophet is about his own ability, he has *no* uncertainty about God's power.¹² That certainty is the foundation for our covenantal connection with Christ. When we combine our finite imperfection with his infinite perfection, we will always rediscover that his "grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before [him]" (12:27).

COMING TO KNOW CHRIST

The high point in the book of Ether occurs when the brother of Jared sees the Lord. It began when "the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord" (3:6). The fact that he "fell down before the Lord, for he was struck with fear" (v. 6) is not unusual for people who experience divine encounters in the scriptures.¹³ From that point forward, however, this experience seems to break from many of the trends in other scriptural encounters with heavenly beings or Deity.

The way Moroni tells this part of the story, the brother of Jared seems to have had a particularly deep sense of reverence for the Lord. Rather than saying, "I saw thy finger and feared lest thou smitest me," he used an impersonal and indirect form of speech: "I saw the finger of the Lord, and I feared lest he should smite me" (3:8); this seems an odd way to address someone who is right in front of you. It appears that he perceived God as a harsh being, one who is easily angered and is ready to smite down his subjects at the least provocation. The Lord corrects some of those identity misconceptions in verse 9. After that point, the brother of Jared began to address him in second person, more directly and less fearfully as demonstrated by statements like "Show thyself unto me" and "Yea, Lord, I know that thou speakest the truth, for thou art a God of truth" (vv. 10, 12).

FORWARD-LOOKING REDEMPTIVE FAITH

Like the brother of Jared, as we come to know the Lord more completely, we come to know ourselves and our own standing before him better as well. He helps us find ways to replace unhealthy fear and limiting misconceptions about his character with appropriate respect and understanding

to empower us to approach him with confidence. Referring to this part of this story, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has taught about the difference between preparatory and redemptive faith: “Preparatory faith is formed by experiences in the past—by the known, which provides a basis for belief. But redemptive faith must often be exercised toward experiences in the future—the unknown, which provides an opportunity for the miraculous.”¹⁴

This redemptive faith was being nurtured in the brother of Jared when the Lord asked, “Believest thou the words which I shall speak?” (Ether 3:11). Here the Lord was requiring present faith for future blessings and answers. Moroni would later explain redemptive faith this way: “Faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith” (12:6).

As disciples of Christ today, we can focus on finding ways to use whatever degree of preparatory or backward-facing assurance we have to strengthen our forward-looking redemptive faith in Christ. Elder David A. Bednar taught this same concept by using three basic elements of faith: “Assurance, action, and evidence influence each other in an ongoing process. This helix is like a coil, and as it spirals upward it expands and widens. These three elements of faith . . . are interrelated and continuous and cycle upward. . . . As we again turn and face forward toward an uncertain future, assurance leads to action and produces evidence, which further increases assurance.”¹⁵

BECOMING CHILDREN OF CHRIST

As a result of developing such a high level of faith in Christ, the brother of Jared became “redeemed from the fall” and was “brought back into [the] presence” of the Lord (Ether 3:13). In that experience the cloud that had shrouded his divine guide was rent. All previous references to Deity in this story used the impersonal and somewhat generic term *the Lord*. While respectful, this title maintained a fairly significant and impersonal divide between God and the brother of Jared. When we think of the Lord strictly in the abstract, it creates a feeling of distance for us as well. In such a mindset, it is easy to become robotic in our discipleship and even misplace our devotion at times. Rather than seeking to come unto Christ to be perfected in him (see Moroni 10:32), we erroneously seek to perfect ourselves

so one day we can come unto Christ. Our activity in the Church is not what saves us; it is a person who saves, and that person has a name, not just many titles. All of the things we do in the Church are simply means whereby we come unto our Savior. Jesus Christ uses these very things to shape us and mold us into new creatures—that is how he saves us. He helps us become more like him through these actions and experiences. Our approach to living the gospel will take on new meaning if we love the actual Being who gave us that gospel, instead of just loving the things he gave us.

The theophany of Ether 3 is a major turning point for the brother of Jared, and it can be for us as well. Here the Book of Mormon takes us through the veil and invites us to share in a holy of holies experience with this great prophet. The shift from impersonal title to unveiled personal identity began when the brother of Jared first saw the Lord in verse 13, but it culminated when he heard the words “Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son” (v. 14). Chronologically, this is the earliest canonized reference we have of the Lord using his future combined name and title.

Most readers of the Book of Mormon are comfortable with Jesus Christ as a Son. The part that is troubling for some is the fact that he also referred to himself as the Father. In the next chapter in Ether, the Lord gives a little clarification on these two titles when he refers to himself as “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of the heavens and of the earth, and all things that in them are” (4:7). Thus everything that lives in our observable universe owes that life to the creative power of Jesus Christ, who operated under the direction of Heavenly Father (see Moses 1:32–33).

Just as important as coming to understand the Lord’s true identity is discovering our own identity and the Lord’s relationship with us. Jesus told the brother of Jared, “In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters” (Ether 3:14). We are all spirit children of heavenly parents, and Jesus is not replacing them in that role. He is, however, offering to become an adoptive, additional Father to all who have faith on his name. In the quote above, he alludes to the fact that everyone will be resurrected and gain an eternal body. He is the one who will engender new

life in that resurrected body. In addition to immortality for all, he offers eternal life for those who truly believe on his name.

Sons and daughters inherit DNA from their parents. If they take care of the mortal life they were given, they will grow up to become like their parents in many ways. The same is true for a spiritual rebirth. When we enter into a covenant relationship with Christ, he becomes the Father of that rebirth, engendering new life in us, allowing us to “grow up” and become new creatures in a profoundly symbolic way. At that point, we have claim on his Fatherly responsibilities to preside over us, provide for our needs, and protect us.¹⁶ Additionally, he offers to take responsibility for us and all our sins. He truly becomes our “everlasting Father” (Isaiah 9:6).

This Father/child relationship is not meant to be exclusionary. On the contrary, only when Christ becomes our Father will our primal relationship with heavenly parents and our mortal relationship with earthly parents become eternally significant and binding as well.

A great prophet, the brother of Jared was shown a panoptic vision (see Ether 3:25–26). “Never were greater things made manifest than those which were made manifest unto the brother of Jared” (4:4). Jesus Christ reassured Moroni that he would once again manifest these things when “they [latter-day Gentiles] shall exercise faith in me . . . even as the brother of Jared did, that they may become sanctified in me” (v. 7). Until that day comes, these things are sealed up.

THREE WITNESSES

Before continuing with the Jaredite narrative, Moroni took an editorial tangent to tell us a little more about the brother of Jared’s vision and how he, Moroni, had been commanded by the Lord to record it and seal it up for future translation (see Ether 3:21–4:5). In the rest of chapter 4, beginning in verse 6, Moroni does what many prophets before him did—he uses first-person language to scribe for the Lord.¹⁷ These verses in Ether 4 give us, Moroni’s intended audience, the chance to hear the voice of Jesus Christ speaking directly to us through Moroni. We find elements in these verses similar to those found in 3 Nephi 27:13–21, where the Lord gave his own definition of the gospel.

Chapter 5 is a tutelage moment between Moroni and Joseph Smith Jr., the latter-day seer who would translate the record. Moroni informs Joseph that the plates will be shown by the power of God to three witnesses (see Ether 5:3). In addition to those witnesses promised to Joseph, Moroni adds three more of his own in verse 4: “The Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost bear record—and all this shall stand as a testimony against the world at the last day.” These heavenly and earthly witnesses combine to make us accountable for what is contained in this book. Moroni symbolically reaches up through the scripture page and down through the corridors of time, grabs our attention, assures us that this book is authentic, and promises that we will see him on the last day when we are standing before God (see v. 6). With that important witness in place, he is finally ready to proceed with the Jaredites’ final leg of the journey to the promised land.

THE JOURNEY’S CONCLUSION

After all they had passed through and all they had learned, the Jaredites would have undoubtedly preferred a smooth and speedy voyage across the ocean. Instead, they endured a 344-day trip that was anything but tranquil. “The Lord God caused that there should be a furious wind blow upon the face of the waters, towards the promised land; and thus they were tossed upon the waves of the sea before the wind” (Ether 6:5). Mountain waves broke upon them and buried them in the depths of the sea (v. 6). As it is with us today, it seems that the Lord got their attention “when they were encompassed about by many waters,” because “they did cry unto the Lord, and he did bring them forth again upon the top of the waters” (v. 7).

Rather than feeling stifled by the storms, these people sang praises to the Lord (6:8). Over six chapters we have watched their faith in Christ grow. We have seen them struggle and we have watched them succeed. At this point in their narrative, they recognize that the fierce winds are not a punishment, nor are they hindering their progress—rather, the fierce winds are the very means of their progression toward the end goal. The harder the wind blows, the faster they progress along the way.

In our lives today, those winds come in many forms: disease, death, loss, rejection, and countless other forces that beat upon us. If we have faith in Christ and continually repent,¹⁸ all of those things that would

otherwise bury us in a sea of despair or stifle our progress actually serve to accelerate the perfection process that Christ is performing within us.

When they landed in the Americas, “they bowed themselves down upon the face of the land, and did humble themselves before the Lord, and did shed tears of joy before the Lord because of the multitude of his tender mercies over them” (6:12). This difficult journey, like all other trials in the Book of Mormon and in our life, did not last forever. The tests of mortality are just that, tests. They eventually come to an end, but we will live on through eternity. We are placed within refining fires and deep waters only for a season, to be shaped and strengthened by them. The Jaredites who landed in the promised land were given every opportunity to be better people than the Jaredites who had launched into the deep nearly a year before. And the same could be said for each segment of our own journey toward our own promised land today. God is inviting us to trust and obey him, especially when life gets difficult, answers become nebulous, and we feel like we lack the strength or wisdom to carry on.

Just because the Jaredites safely arrived in the promised land did not mean that was the end of their troubles and trials. The end of their ocean voyage became the launching point for their next set of learning opportunities, not only for them but also for subsequent generations.

In conclusion, which would we prefer, being born in ideal settings, with great abilities and knowledge, or acquiring wisdom and power through monumental struggles? Even though the Jaredites’ story occurred thousands of years ago, there is an oddly familiar ring that resonates from these chapters. Thanks to Moroni acting as our chronological intercessor, we can learn from the relevance of these people’s lives and legacies as we take our turn journeying over the land, building our symbolic barges, and launching into the deep opportunities that await us today. Our end goal is not just to get to heaven; it is to allow Jesus Christ to perfect us as we increasingly allow him to make our soul an outpost of heaven on earth. Moroni summed this up best when he said, “And now, I would commend you to seek this Jesus” (12:41).

NOTES

1. Considering that the Jaredite story begins sometime around the Tower of Babel, in Noah's dispensation.
2. A study of Ether 6–15 reveals a great depth of violence and satanic influence among the Jaredites.
3. Moroni is aware of the need for more than one witness for his work that will come forth in the latter days (see Ether 5). It is possible that he sees the testimony of the Jaredites as the third witness to be added to those of the Nephites and Lamanites. On the law of witnesses generally, see Matthew 18:16 and 2 Corinthians 13:1.
4. This assumes that the Nephite story stretches from 600 BC to shortly after AD 400, compared with the Jaredite record that spans thirty generations (see Ether 1:6–32) from sometime before 2000 BC until both histories overlap with the Mulekite people, sometime after 586 BC (see Omni 1:20–22).
5. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 104. He goes on to explain, "Heaven and earth, it seems, are not after all poles apart, needing to be separated forever when all the children of heaven have been rescued from this wicked earth. Nor are they simply different ways of looking at the same thing. . . . No, they are different, radically different, but they are made for each other in the same way as male and female. And when they finally come together, that will be cause for rejoicing in the same way that a wedding is: a creational sign that God's project is going forward, that opposite poles within creation are made for union, not competition" (p. 105).
6. Elder Neal A. Maxwell once said, "Let us acknowledge that the strait and narrow path, though clearly marked, is a path, not a freeway nor an escalator. Indeed, there are times when the only way the strait and narrow path can be followed is on one's knees!" "A Brother Offended," *Ensign*, May 1982.
7. See, for instance, Matthew 1:1–16; Luke 3:23–38; Genesis 4, 5, 10, 11.
8. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 103.
9. This same pattern is demonstrated in the war chapters of the book of Alma. Once multiple cities were taken by the Lamanites in Alma 51, Captain Moroni, Lehi, and Teancum in the east and Helaman in the south repeatedly focused their efforts on one city at a time until they had reconquered all of the cities that had been lost.

10. President Ezra Taft Benson taught, “When we put God first, all other things fall into their proper place or drop out of our lives.” “The Great Commandment—Love the Lord,” *Ensign*, May 1988.
11. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland gives insightful and informative commentary on this experience in his book *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 14–18.
12. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Rending the Veil of Unbelief,” in *Nurturing Faith through the Book of Mormon: The 24th Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 12.
13. See Matthew 28:5; Luke 1:13, 30; 2:10; Revelation 1:17.
14. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant*, 18–19.
15. David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith” (Church Educational System broadcast, 3 February 2006, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2007/09/seek-learning-by-faith>).
16. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 2010, 129.
17. Isaiah’s phrase “Thus saith the Lord” appears thirty-six times in the Book of Mormon with the first instance found in 1 Nephi 20:17. Another phrase from Isaiah, “Saith the Lord God,” appears 15 times in the record with the first instance being found in 1 Nephi 21:22 and mostly used by Nephi thereafter. In addition to these phrases, Nephi records short quotes from Jesus (see 2 Nephi 31:12, 14) as well as lengthy speeches (see 2 Nephi 28:30–29:14). Notably, Samuel, the only Lamanite preacher recorded in the Book of Mormon, uses this technique as well (see Helaman 13:8–20).
18. See Russell M. Nelson, “We Can Do Better and Be Better,” *Ensign*, May 2019.

