
ALMA THE YOUNGER:
A DISCIPLE'S QUEST TO BECOME

Jerome M. Perkins

Those who lack an eternal perspective of life can yield to cynicism when reviewing the purpose of our existence, just as Macbeth pessimistically summarized the value of life upon hearing of Lady Macbeth's death:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle,
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.¹

Yet a gracious God cuts through this cynicism with statements regarding the purpose of life: "And those who overcome [the natural

Jerome M. Perkins is an associate professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

man] by faith, . . . it is written, they are gods, even the sons [and daughters] of God” (D&C 76:53, 58). “Therefore I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48). Thus, in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, our existence is seen neither as brief nor as “signifying nothing,” as Macbeth declared. Resonating in the teachings of the gospel of Christ is our eternal destiny to become like God.

Indeed, one of the key messages of the Book of Mormon is that the human soul must change, must progress, must become. The Book of Mormon is, in effect, a handbook of change, with the Lord seeking to motivate mighty change within us by using the lives and teachings of the Book of Mormon protagonists as the means to teach us how to become. At the heart of the Book of Mormon, in the books of Mosiah and Alma, Alma the Younger makes the subject of change, progression, and becoming the very essence of his life and sermons, and thus Alma the Younger becomes a quintessential standard of how to become like God.

EXAMPLE OF ALMA THE YOUNGER

Alma the Younger provides a powerful example of the change that disciples must experience to realize their eternal destinies. First, Alma was awakened to the understanding that life is more than rebellion and selfishness. Second, he learned that God wants us all to be “born again” and to become “sons and daughters . . . new creatures” (Mosiah 27:25–26). In his teachings and sermons, Alma the Younger pleads with us that we must come to those same realizations. We know that Mormon selected the stories and doctrines of the Book of Mormon specifically for us in the latter days (see Mormon 8:35), so when Alma repeatedly bears testimony to his people of his conversion, he is really bearing his testimony to us. When Alma the Younger intimately teaches of the mighty change that occurred in his own life, and how he became more and more blessed by God, he is, in reality, teaching us to follow his example; we are to understand our spiritual standing before God and become aware that we have the capacity to become like God.

Alma bore witness to his first awakening: “My soul hath been redeemed from the gall of bitterness and bonds of iniquity. I was in the

ALMA THE YOUNGER: A DISCIPLE'S QUEST 153

darkest abyss; . . . I rejected my Redeemer, and denied that which had been spoken of by our fathers” (Mosiah 27:29). He later testified: “I saw that I had rebelled against my God, and that I had not kept his holy commandments. . . . I had murdered many of his children, or rather led them away unto destruction” (Alma 36:13–14). His life had become so futile that he desired to “be banished and become extinct both soul and body, that [he] might not be brought to stand in the presence of God, to be judged of [his] deeds” (Alma 36:15).

However, at this crossroad, Alma the Younger was also awakened to the real meaning of life. The first sermon that he preached after his three-day experience of change was replete with his newfound wisdom regarding the purpose of life: “And the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind . . . must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; and thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God” (Mosiah 27:25–26). Notice Alma’s emphasis upon becoming—“born again,” “born of God,” “changed from a fallen state to a state of righteousness,” “being redeemed of God,” “becoming sons and daughters.” Doctrine and Covenants section 76 explains more regarding the meaning of becoming sons and daughters of God. It teaches that to become sons and daughters of God means to become gods, to receive the nature and character of God to the point of becoming joint heirs with Jesus Christ and receiving all things that God has (see D&C 76:54–59). Alma came to these two significant understandings: first, his life had been fruitless until this defining moment, and second, the rest of his life was to be dedicated to becoming like God and helping others do the same.

ALMA'S AWAKENING

Awakened to the Reality of Who He Had Become

Before Alma could comprehend anything regarding eternal progression, the Lord had to awaken him to the truth that he had become an enemy to God. Alma emphasized this awakening: “I was struck with such great fear and amazement lest perhaps I should be destroyed, that

I fell to the earth and I did hear no more. . . . I was racked with eternal torment. . . . I did remember all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell; . . . I had rebelled against my God. . . . I had murdered many of his children, or rather led them away unto destruction” (Alma 36:11–14). Alma was awakened to what he had become, and this revelation horrified him.

For individuals to embark upon the quest of becoming like God, they must first be awakened to the reality of their present lives, what they have already become. Chauncey C. Riddle stated: “As any person comes to spiritual self-consciousness, he will realize that his mind, his desires, his habits, his manners, and his politics have all been shaped by the people [and the culture] in his physical environment. What he hitherto thought to be himself he now sees as the encrustations of the world upon his true self.”²

Elder Bruce C. Hafen told a story of a university student who had unknowingly allowed worldly influences to encrust “his true self.” This bright student spoke of an earlier time of innocence and faith, when as a boy he had pled with God to save a dying calf. He cried out to the Lord for help, and “before long the little animal began breathing again. He knew his prayer had been heard. After relating this story, the tears welled up in his eyes and he said, ‘. . . I tell you that story because I don’t think I would do now what I did then.’” He spoke of how he had become “older, less naive, and more experienced.” Then he concluded: “I don’t understand what has happened to me since that time, but I sense that something has gone wrong.”³

If we are not aware, if we are not at times shaken and awakened, our lives can go terribly wrong, and we won’t even notice the change. That is why, in the process of becoming, Alma the Younger stands as the example that each of us needs to be awakened to who we have really become. The Lord does this awakening all throughout scripture, especially in the chapters revolving around the life of Alma the Younger. The Savior uses many different means to help us grasp the gravity of those times when we have become less than what we and God desire. In Alma 4:3, Alma writes regarding his people: “And so great were their afflictions, . . . they were awakened to a remembrance of their duty.”

ALMA THE YOUNGER: A DISCIPLE'S QUEST 155

In Alma 5, Alma reminds the people of Zarahemla how their fathers were brought into bondage by the hands of the Lamanites and how through that bondage, the Lord “changed their hearts; yea, he awakened them out of a deep sleep, and they awoke unto God. . . . Their souls were illuminated by the light of the everlasting word” (v. 7).

To the people of Gideon, Alma noted: “I have said these things unto you that I might awaken you to a sense of your duty to God, that you may walk blameless before him” (Alma 7:22).

Amulek realized that although he was wealthy, popular, and powerful, he had hardened his heart against God. He realized he had been called many times to serve yet would not hear the call (see Alma 10:4–10).

Zeezrom was awakened by the words of a prophet, and he cried out, “I am guilty” (Alma 14:7; see also vv. 6–11).

The Zoramites were despised because of their poverty, but Alma was overjoyed because this poverty had awakened them to their need for God and His gospel (see Alma 32:3–8).

Corianton was awakened to the peril he faced, because a loving father taught him principles of the gospel: “And now behold, my son, do not risk one more offense against your God upon those points of doctrine, which ye have hitherto risked to commit sin. Do not suppose . . . that ye shall be restored from sin to happiness. Behold, I say unto you, wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:9–10).

Elder Dallin H. Oaks spoke of how God uses tribulation: “Our needed conversions are often achieved more readily by suffering and adversity than by comfort and tranquility,”⁴ and in looking at the way the Lord awakened Alma, Amulek, Zeezrom, the Zoramites, and so many others, this theme of suffering to awaken man is oft repeated. We as disciples also receive these wake-up calls.

As it did to the Zoramites (see Alma 32), poverty makes us desire happiness when we don’t have the world’s definitions of it. Poverty makes us humble, dependent upon God, sensitive to the whisperings of the Spirit. When we are poor in finances, popularity, security, strength, intellect, prestige, or any other worldly definition of success, the pain of that poverty can become a magnificent impetus to motivate us to search for something better.

Zeezrom was humbled when his powerful intellect was overwhelmed by the pure testimony of Amulek and Alma the Younger. Zeezrom had depended on his cunning, his wits, his smooth delivery to survive and thrive his entire life, but he was totally astonished when he stood indicted and convicted before these humble servants of God. Like Zeezrom, we also realize that our intellects and theories are shallow and insufficient when we strive to explain or make sense of the nuances of life. Like Zeezrom, we cry out that we are guilty of living a worthless life, of wasting our living on lies and deceptions and destruction (see Alma 14:6–7). Like Zeezrom, we become ill—emotionally, spiritually, and physically—as we deeply ponder the failures of our lives, and we also cry out to the Master, “Heal me” (see Alma 15:5).

Alma the Younger similarly realized his nothingness in his three-day ordeal of compelled introspection. He realized he had received no answers from the sorrows of life he had embraced. How immature was Alma’s resolution of his life’s convoluted predicament: “Oh, thought I, that I could be banished and become extinct both soul and body, that I might not be brought to stand in the presence of my God, to be judged of my deeds” (Alma 36:15). He wished that he never existed. He was so overwhelmed by life, this was his only solution.

If needed, God will bring us to our knees as He did Alma. As we face life’s convoluted predicaments, we also, without God’s guidance, will invent immature solutions. However, these dilemmas become motivating in the hands of our loving God. The goal of these overwhelming predicaments is to bring us to our omnipotent and omniscient God, just as Alma was brought to God: “While I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins, behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world. Now as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me. . . . And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more. . . . My soul was filled with joy” (Alma 36:17–20).

In our lives, we must not only come to an awakening of what we have become, but also to an awakening to the “Son of God, [sent] to

ALMA THE YOUNGER: A DISCIPLE'S QUEST 157

atone for the sins of the world” (Alma 36:17), and we must cry out, “O Jesus, have mercy on me.” Then joy becomes ours.

Although Elder Oaks emphasized that “our needed conversions are often achieved more readily by suffering and adversity than by comfort and tranquility,” the wisest disciple will seek, on his own, an awakening to the reality of what he has become. Elder Neal A. Maxwell gently counseled: “Meek introspection may yield bold insights.”⁵ In the story told by Elder Hafen, the college student remembered when he had the faith to heal the calf through the mercy of God, yet he could no longer feel that faith, and he said, “I don’t understand what has happened to me . . . , but I sense that something has gone wrong.” Throughout his sermons, Alma the Younger consistently asked the Nephites, and more importantly each one of us, “Has something gone wrong in your lives, or do you still feel the redeeming love of Christ” in statements such as these: “Have you sufficiently retained in remembrance the captivity of your fathers? Yea, and have you sufficiently retained in remembrance [God’s] mercy and longsuffering towards them?” (Alma 5:6). It is the judicious disciple who consistently seeks honest answers to Alma the Younger’s questions: “I ask of you . . . have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts,” and “if ye have experienced a change of heart . . . can ye feel so now?” (Alma 5:14, 26).

Alma stressed that if needed, the Lord will compel the child to be humble and repent, yet the real disciple is humble because of his understanding of and love for the Master of mercy: “And now, as I said unto you, that because ye were compelled to be humble ye were blessed, do ye not suppose that they are more blessed who truly humble themselves because of the word? Yea, he that truly humbleth himself, and repenteth of his sins, and endureth to the end, the same shall be blessed—yea, much more blessed than they who are compelled to be humble because of their exceeding poverty” (Alma 32:14–15). Uncompelled humility leads the disciple to consistently answer, “I have experienced a change of heart, and I can still feel it now.”

Awakened to the Reality of Who He Could Become

Alma had experienced that mighty change of heart. When he cried out, “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me,” the Savior

eliminated the pain of Alma's horrendous past and established the pathway of Alma's future. Alma felt exquisite joy that filled his whole soul. He beheld the light of eternal truth, and he said that there was nothing so sweet. And he was awakened to his destiny: "I saw . . . God sitting upon his throne, . . . and my soul did long to be there" (Alma 36:22; see also Alma 36:18–21). Alma ached to return and be with this God who had rescued him. He testified of this destiny: "God has delivered me from prison . . . and from death; yea, and I do put my trust in him, and he will still deliver me. And I know that he will raise me up at the last day, to dwell with him in glory; yea and I will praise him forever" (Alma 36:27–28). Alma knew that he would return to God because of his conversion. Now his task was to assist his beloved people to do the same. So he spent the rest of his life teaching his people the gospel.

Alma consistently emphasized that there were barriers to this eternal destiny. He asked the people in Zarahemla if they, being wicked, would be able to enter the kingdom of God and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is asking us the very same question which he forcefully answered with a direct, "Nay" (see Alma 5:21–25). He taught all of us that if we are in a state of filthiness, that awful state will condemn us (see Alma 12:13), and that if we are filthy in this life, we will be filthy in the next life and no unclean thing can enter into the kingdom of God (see Alma 7:21). Alma was aware of the doctrine that the "same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world" (Alma 34:34), and this doctrine impelled Alma to command his people and us to make sure our earthly spirit, or who we had really become, would qualify us for entrance into the kingdom of God. He taught the Nephites and us that men will be judged regarding entrance to the kingdom of God not only by their works but by the desires of their hearts, the state of their being, and the intrinsic nature of who they have become. He stressed that if our desires, states of being, and intrinsic natures are good, we will receive good in the world to come; if evil, evil in the world to come. Alma asked very basic and logical questions that when carefully considered, change the focus of our lives: Can sin lead to happiness? Can you find joy when your nature

ALMA THE YOUNGER: A DISCIPLE'S QUEST 159

is contrary to joy? Can you become like God, when your nature is contrary to God? (see Alma 41:3–15).

Alma the Younger spoke of the “state” of our being as the significant criterion for our judgment: “For our words will condemn us, yea our works will condemn us; we shall not be found spotless; and our thoughts will also condemn us; and in this awful state we will not dare to look up to our God” (Alma 12:14). Notice how Alma the Younger combines words, works, and thoughts into a composite whole he calls our “state.” The definition of the word *state* indicates that our entrance into the kingdom of God will not be based on what we show to the world—our actions, works, deeds, words, and promises—but will be based upon who we have intrinsically become.⁶ Alma taught that we must be changed from a carnal and fallen state to a state of righteousness (see Mosiah 27:25) or that we must change from being intrinsically carnal to intrinsically righteous.

Elder Oaks stated: “From such teachings we conclude that the Final Judgment is not just an evaluation of the sum total of good and evil acts—what we have *done*. It is an acknowledgment of the final effect of our acts and thoughts [upon us]—what we have *become*.”⁷ In his sermon to the people of Zarahemla, Alma the Younger captured the essence of what we are to become when he asked one basic question: “Have ye received his image in your countenances?” (Alma 5:14). In other words, he asked, when people see you, do they see Jesus the Christ? Have you become such a representative disciple of Christ that when you are present the Spirit of Christ is there? These questions awaken all disciples to the fact that we must consider the essence of our existence; we are here to become like Christ. Ephesians 4:13 testifies that we are here to attain “the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” Alma had been awakened to the reality of what he could become, and he then called for his people to have a similar awakening. That call is also to us, to all disciples of Christ. Regarding the importance of being a disciple who becomes, Chauncey Riddle taught: “The word *disciple* comes from the Latin *discipulus*, a learner. A disciple of Christ is one who is learning to be like Christ—learning to think, to feel, and to act as he does. To be a true disciple, to fulfill that learning task, is the most demanding regimen known to man. No other discipline compares with it in either

requirements or rewards. It involves *the total transformation* of a person from a *state* of the natural man to that of the saint, one who loves the Lord and serves with all his heart, might, mind, and strength.”⁸

Elder Oaks testified that this total transformation is achievable:

This process requires far more than acquiring knowledge. It is not even enough for us to be *convinced* of the gospel; we must act and think so that we are *converted* by it. In contrast to the institutions of the world, which teach us to *know* something, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to *become* something. . . .

It is not enough for anyone just to go through the motions. The commandments, ordinances, and covenants of the gospel are not a list of deposits required to be made in some heavenly account. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a plan that shows us how to become what our Heavenly Father desires us to become. . . .

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the plan by which we can become what children of God are supposed to become. This spotless and perfected state will result from a steady succession of covenants, ordinances, and actions, an accumulation of right choices and from continuing repentance.⁹

CONCLUSION

Alma’s change, his conversion, was so spiritually profound, he was impelled to teach this conversion process and this imperative goal of becoming to all during his entire earthly ministry. Alma testified:

Nevertheless, after wading through much tribulation, repenting nigh unto death, the Lord in mercy hath seen fit to snatch me out of an everlasting burning, and I am born of God. . . .

And now it came to pass that Alma began from this time forward to teach the people, and those who were with Alma at the time the angel appeared unto them, . . . preaching the word of God. . . .

And thus they were instruments in the hands of God in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth, yea, to the knowledge of their Redeemer.

ALMA THE YOUNGER: A DISCIPLE'S QUEST 161

And how blessed are they! For they did publish peace; they did publish good tidings of good; and they did declare unto the people that the Lord reigneth. (Mosiah 27:28, 32, 36, 37)

Alma spent the rest of his life sharing this message that man must change, become, and progress to be like God and Christ. He relinquished earthly power and prestige when he resigned as chief judge, yet “he retained the office of high priest unto himself . . . that he might preach the word of God unto them” (Alma 4:18–19). Alma “confined himself wholly to the high priesthood, . . . to the testimony of the word” (Alma 4:20), because he knew “the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else” (Alma 31:5). Alma lovingly explained that he was called to the priesthood order “to preach unto my beloved brethren, yea, and every one that dwelleth in the land; yea to preach unto all, . . . to cry unto them that they must repent and be born again” (Alma 5:49). In this verse, one can see Alma’s charge to also teach us.

In his teaching of God’s word, Alma was motivated by Christlike ideals: “I do not glory of myself, but I glory in that which the Lord hath commanded me; yea, and this is my glory, that perhaps I may be an instrument in the hands of God to bring some soul to repentance; and this is my joy” (Alma 29:9). He taught that each of us must awaken to the dangers of a sinful life. We must accept and depend wholly upon Christ, and through Him we can progress, change, and become like the Master whom Alma loved so much. Alma the Younger spoke of these principles to his beloved son Shiblon: “And now, my son, I have told you this that ye may learn wisdom, that ye may learn of me that there is no other way or means whereby man can be saved, only in and through Christ. Behold, he is the life and the light of the world. Behold, he is the word of truth and righteousness” (Alma 38:9).

And at the conclusion of his life, Alma had not lost the burning desire to teach of his Savior and the mighty change the Master had fostered in his own heart and could foster in the hearts of all mankind: “The sons of Alma did go forth among the people, to declare the word unto them. And Alma, also, himself, *could not rest*, and he also went forth.

... They preached the word, and the truth, according to the spirit of prophecy and revelation” (Alma 43:1–2; emphasis added). Christ reached into Alma’s life and saved this rebellious son of a prophet, rescued him from himself, and gave him a vision of the eternal life that could be his. Alma was mightily changed. He progressed and became like his Master, and the process was so fantastic and marvelous, so imperative and essential to all, that Alma shared this message valiantly and passionately his entire life.

NOTES

1. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 5.5.21–30 (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 78.
2. Chauncey C. Riddle, “Becoming a Disciple,” *Ensign*, September 1974, 81.
3. Bruce C. Hafen, “Is Yours a Believing Heart?” *Ensign*, September 1974, 52–53.
4. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, November 2000, 33.
5. Neal A. Maxwell, “Swallowed Up in the Will of the Father,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 24.
6. The word *state* is defined as “the set of attributes characterizing a person’s being; one’s emotional, mental, or psychological condition; the way someone is, intrinsically” (*Merriam-Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, s.v. “state”).
7. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” 32.
8. Riddle, “Becoming a Disciple,” 81.
9. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” 33; emphasis added.