

## CHOOSING REDEMPTION

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The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “If you wish to go where God is, you must be like God.”<sup>1</sup> When we accept that we must become more godly to be in God’s presence, we can better appreciate the promise that a “man would get nearer to God by abiding by [the Book of Mormon’s] precepts, than by any other book.”<sup>2</sup> The Book of Mormon teaches us how to get nearer to God, in part because it shows the distance between us and God. Once we understand the reality of our condition, we might be tempted to despair. But the Book of Mormon teaches us that Christ has power to redeem us and that as we choose to receive that power our natures are changed. The Book of Mormon also helps us understand that this redemptive change comes through the process of having faith in our Savior and repenting of our sins. Repentance and sanctification become redemption as we are delivered from the bondage of sin and the natural man. Through the Book of Mormon, we learn how to get nearer to God because we learn how to become more like Him.

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## THE NEED TO BE REDEEMED: THE FALL

The Book of Mormon testifies of our fallen state and need for a Redeemer.<sup>3</sup> While this message has not always been well received and is certainly not a popular theme today, understanding our need for redemption and divine help is absolutely essential to allow us to draw nearer to God. The condition of human nature when separated from God is powerfully conveyed in the words of Abinadi, Amulek, and King Benjamin, among others.

Abinadi speaks to King Noah and his priests, who are all intent on believing that they can be acceptable to God without faith and repentance. They want to believe that the good news sent by the Lord's messengers is that we can save ourselves without redemption (see Mosiah 12:9–32). A central part of Abinadi's witness of the redemption of Christ is his witness of our fallen state: "For they are carnal and devilish, and the devil has power over them; yea, even that old serpent that did beguile our first parents, which was the cause of their fall; which was the cause of all mankind becoming carnal, sensual, devilish, knowing evil from good, subjecting themselves to the devil. Thus all mankind were lost; and behold, they would have been endlessly lost were it not that God redeemed his people from their lost and fallen state" (Mosiah 16:3–4). This testimony of the reality of our condition without a Redeemer was the main reason Abinadi was killed.

A similar testimony of our fallen state can be found in Amulek's witness to the Zoramites, who were, like the people of King Noah, confident in their ability to please God without a Redeemer (see Alma 31:16–17). After Alma's testimony of how to plant the seed of faith in Christ's Atonement (see Alma 32–33), Amulek continued to explain how important it is to recognize our complete reliance on the power of the Redeemer: "It is expedient that an atonement should be made; for according to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish; yea, all are hardened; yea, all are fallen and are lost, and must perish except it be through the atonement which it is expedient should be made" (Alma 34:9). Like Abinadi, Amulek makes it clear that this is a universal condition: "All are hardened; yea, *all* are fallen and are lost" (emphasis added). Accepting the reality of our lost and fallen state requires a

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tremendous amount of humility, especially when we would rather look at ourselves as being “religious,” as did the priests of King Noah and the Zoramites.

The message of our nature as “carnal, sensual, devilish” and of our state as fallen and lost does not immediately seem like good news or like a positive message. Like the priests of King Noah, we might ask why we are being given such discouraging news. Why does the Book of Mormon teach this? It is not to make us despair, however, but to make us humble and recognize our need for a Redeemer. When we start to learn of and believe in the existence of spiritual captivity as taught in the Book of Mormon, we begin to see the reality of our spiritual condition. We are then prepared to choose the redemptive power of Christ to change our natures.

King Benjamin preached the same message as Abinadi and Amulek but was more successful because he had an especially receptive audience. The message of the Fall and the Redemption did not remain an abstract principle for them; they allowed it to change their hearts and minds. Closely studying and pondering these messages and the impact they had can allow the same change to take place in our lives. King Benjamin clearly taught both the problem of and the solution to our spiritual state: “For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:19).

Learning how to read and apply these kinds of teachings is comparable to going to the doctor when we have a serious health condition or going to a financial consultant when we are deeply in debt. When we lie to ourselves and insist that we don’t have a problem, nothing that we are told about how to get better will make any difference. It is a natural human tendency to want to preserve our sense that everything is okay and that we don’t need to make changes. The repeated message of the Lord’s prophets in the Book of Mormon is that things are not okay. We are not okay. All are fallen. All are lost. Through the Fall of Adam

and Eve, we have all become subject to the devil and are in bondage to him.

When I am willing to see the reality of my natural state as an enemy to God, I begin to see my own pride, impatience, and resentment as opposites of the character of a saint, who is “submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love” (Mosiah 3:19). When we are willing to start seeing the reality of our condition and accept the diagnosis of our problems, we can then begin to really listen to the solution that is being offered. When I acknowledge that it is *my* nature and heart that are so often an enemy to God, I can also appreciate that *I* am the one who needs to “[yield] to the enticings of the Holy Spirit” (Mosiah 3:19). When we are told the reality of our spiritual condition and are actually willing to accept the diagnosis, we are then in a condition to actually follow through with the remedy prescribed. When I read scriptural descriptions of weaknesses and apply them to other people rather than myself, I am not able to hear and follow the help being offered me.

When we are willing to face the “bad news” without evading it or lying to ourselves, then we are really prepared for the “good news”—the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we recognize our individual need to be changed, then we can learn about the power of redemption. King Benjamin’s explanation of the “good news” of how the power of the redemption works in our lives directly followed the “bad news” of the natural man’s being an enemy to God. That state is real, but the way out of that condition is just as real. King Benjamin explains that we do not need to stay in bondage to the power of the evil one. We can choose redemption. “For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, *unless* he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord” (Mosiah 3:19; emphasis added). We can choose to yield “to the enticings of the Holy Spirit.” We can choose to put off our natural state, which keeps us in bondage, becoming Saints “through the atonement of Christ the Lord.”

This joint explanation of our spiritual captivity and the potential for redemption through Christ is the Book of Mormon’s message of how we can draw nearer to God. It is a message explained more clearly

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in this book than in any other source.<sup>4</sup> Spiritual bondage and sin are real, but so is redemption through the Atonement of Christ the Lord, and we have a constant invitation to choose to apply that redemptive power in our lives.

Summing up his teachings to King Noah and his priests, Abinadi focuses on the choice provided us to leave our carnal natures through Christ's Redemption. He explains both the bad news of our spiritual captivity and the good news that we do not need to be trapped forever: "Thus all mankind were lost; and behold, they would have been endlessly lost were it not that God redeemed his people from their lost and fallen state" (Mosiah 16:4). The potential for redemption is real because of Christ's Atonement, but Abinadi makes it clear that we must choose to apply that power in our lives: "But remember that he that persists in his own carnal nature, and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion against God, remaineth in his fallen state and the devil hath all power over him. Therefore he is as though there was no redemption made, being an enemy to God; and also is the devil an enemy to God" (Mosiah 16:5).

This echoes King Benjamin's point about the certainty of remaining an enemy to God "*unless* he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit" (Mosiah 3:19; emphasis added). Abinadi warns that "he that persists in his own carnal nature, and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion against God, remaineth in his fallen state and the devil hath all power over him" (Mosiah 16:5). If we do not choose to be changed through Christ and leave our natural and carnal state behind, then we do not choose to accept the power of redemption in our lives. We are choosing to stay far away from God because we were not willing to give away our sins to know Him (see Alma 22:18).

Satan is very flexible in his efforts to keep us away from God. At times he uses the approach of the priests of King Noah: "What great evil hast thou done, or what great sins have thy people committed, that we should be condemned of God or judged of this man?" (Mosiah 12:13). But while he would have us believe that there are no barriers between us and God, that we are just fine the way we are and have no need to make changes, he is perfectly capable of changing his tune when necessary. When we start to see the reality of our fallen nature and our

spiritual weaknesses, quiet, subtle messages come to us trying to convince us that this is just the way we are. Rather than giving us unrealistic hope, he gives us unrealistic despair. He wants us to believe that nothing can remove us from the captivity of our weaknesses.

#### THE POWER TO BE REDEEMED: THE ATONEMENT

Unlike the messages of the world that either deny or excuse ungodliness, the precepts of the Book of Mormon repeatedly insist both that we are unclean and that no unclean thing can dwell in the presence of God (see 1 Nephi 10:21; Alma 11:37; Alma 40:26; 3 Nephi 27:19). But the good news of the Book of Mormon is that there is a way to be cleansed and redeemed from sin and our fallen nature. The Book of Mormon testifies that the price of redemption has been paid through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and that we can choose to accept the power of redemption in our lives.

The invitation to accept Christ's offer of cleansing and redemption is repeated throughout the Book of Mormon. Moroni ends the Book of Mormon with the invitation to "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness" (Moroni 10:32). A much earlier version of this final invitation is found in the final words of Amaleki, who concluded the small plates of Nephi. Amaleki, like Moroni, focuses both on what we need to do and what Christ will do for us that is beyond our own power: "And now, my beloved brethren, I would that ye should come unto Christ, who is the Holy One of Israel, and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption. Yea, come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him, and continue in fasting and praying, and endure to the end; and as the Lord liveth ye will be saved" (Omni 1:26). We cannot redeem ourselves. Only Christ has power to do that. But we can choose to "partake of . . . the power of his redemption." We make that choice step by step as we "offer [our] whole souls as offering unto him." With each choice to give up our sins, the power of redemption is able to become operative in our lives. Our faith and repentance enable us to be redeemed.

Christ has the power of His Redemption to offer us, and we offer Him our whole souls to be redeemed. This parallels King Benjamin's invitation to put off the natural man. The choice to put off the natural

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man is not painless. Each step of the process can be difficult, especially to the extent that we think that our weaknesses define us. As we recognize even one aspect of ourselves or our behavior as ungodly we are tempted to feel as though that is just the way we are. We can't change that much. We can't let that go. But letting go is precisely what the Lord requires to redeem us. He asks us to give away part of ourselves: to "offer our whole souls as offering unto him" (Omni 1:26).

The willingness to make this offering is beautifully illustrated by the fearsome king of the Lamanities, the father of King Lamoni. After Ammon's generosity of spirit humbled the king of the Lamanites, he allowed Ammon's brother Aaron to preach the gospel to him. Aaron's plain teaching included a no-illusions message of the Fall and the Atonement. Aaron explained "how God created man after his own image, and that God gave him commandments, and that because of transgression, man had fallen. And Aaron did expound unto him the scriptures from the creation of Adam, laying the fall of man before him, and their carnal state and also the plan of redemption, which was prepared from the foundation of the world, through Christ, for all whosoever would believe on his name. And since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance, and so forth" (Alma 22:12-14).

Having clearly been taught that he was fallen and "could not merit anything of himself" King Lamoni's father was brought down in the depths of humility. He knew that only faith and repentance could allow the "sufferings and death of Christ [to] atone for [his] sins," and so he prayed mightily: "I will give away all my sins to know thee, and that I may be raised from the dead, and be saved at the last day" (Alma 22:18). This heartfelt prayer is a perfect articulation of his willingness to give up the way he thought about himself and his old way of living. It is this godly sorrow, genuine remorse, and penitence that we must cultivate in order to want to change badly enough to be willing to give away our sins and receive Christ's Redemption.

In our day, Elder Neal A. Maxwell offered an eloquent description of this internal condition. He observed, "So it is that real, personal sacrifice never was placing an animal on the altar. Instead, it is a

willingness to put the animal in us upon the altar and letting it be consumed!”<sup>5</sup> We sacrifice ourselves by denying ourselves all ungodliness—even, and especially, that which lies deep within our own hearts. His comments further illuminate Amaleki’s exhortation to “offer your whole souls as an offering unto him” (Omni 1:26).

As we accept Christ’s command to give away our sins, we also choose to accept the power of His Redemption. The power to become different people is found through opening ourselves to the power of Christ’s Redemption. Moroni’s closing invitation of the Book of Mormon, referred to earlier, clarifies the choices we must make to receive redemption. He exhorts us: “Yea, 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” (Moroni 10:32).

Redemption is in Christ. It is “by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ.” This can include the justification that comes from sincere repentance and the ordinances of baptism and the sacrament. This justification means that we are forgiven for the things that we have done wrong, and they are no longer held against us because Christ’s Atonement pays the price.<sup>6</sup> But there is an even more powerful message here. Christ’s Redemption is not merely to forgive the past—it is to sanctify as well as to justify. Moroni here clarifies the choices that we can make that allow the power of Christ’s Atonement to change our natures. We must deny ourselves of all ungodliness and love God with all our might, mind, and strength (see also D&C 20:30–31). As we do this and “deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot” (Moroni 10:33). As we become “holy, without spot” redemption has taken place in our lives.

The Lord’s prophets and apostles today continually urge us to follow this pattern and accept the power of redemption and sanctification. Elder David A. Bednar explained how the choice to deny ourselves of all ungodliness is also a choice to invite the sanctifying Spirit of



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the Lord to be in our lives. He warns us about the daily choices we make that open up, or close off, the potential for redemption, saying:

We should attend to and learn from the choices and influences that separate us from the Holy Spirit. The standard is clear. If something we think, see, hear, or do distances us from the Holy Ghost, then we should stop thinking, seeing, hearing, or doing that thing. If that which is intended to entertain, for example, alienates us from the Holy Spirit, then certainly that type of entertainment is not for us. Because the Spirit cannot abide that which is vulgar, crude, or immodest, then clearly such things are not for us. Because we estrange the Spirit of the Lord when we engage in activities we know we should shun, then such things definitely are not for us.<sup>7</sup>

As we choose to draw nearer to God, He will help us identify things that could keep us far away from Him. As we live worthy of the gift of the Holy Ghost, we open ourselves up for the sanctifying power of the Atonement to redeem us and change us.

The good news of the gospel testifies that Christ's power can change our very natures. He does not impose that power upon us without our will, but when we want Him and His righteousness more than we want to keep our sins, we feel His redeeming power.

Significantly, the Book of Mormon testifies that Christ came to redeem us *from* our sins, not *in* our sins (see Helaman 5:10). This statement comes in a powerful set of statements by the prophet Helaman to his sons, Nephi and Lehi, in which he encapsulates the most critical doctrinal precepts of the Book of Mormon. First he reminds them that King Benjamin taught "that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, who shall come; yea, remember that he cometh to redeem the world" (Helaman 5:9). Then he reminds them of "the words which Amulek spake unto Zeezrom, in the city of Ammonihah; for he said unto him that the Lord surely should come to redeem his people, but that he should not come to redeem them in their sins, but to redeem them from their sins" (Helaman 5:10). Accepting these two points about redemption is essential if we wish to draw closer to God. We must

recognize that “there is no other way” than through Christ’s atoning blood and also recognize that this redemption demands that we leave our sins behind. Christ has the power to redeem us from our sins. We alone have the power to stop Him.

We choose to invite the power of His Redemption to be with us when we choose to invite the Spirit of the Lord into our lives. King Benjamin explains how choosing to invite the Spirit and “yielding to its enticings” is choosing to be redeemed. When we follow the Spirit’s enticings to do good we “[*become saints*] through the atonement of Christ the Lord” (Mosiah 3:19; emphasis added). A further explanation of the process of redemption is given by Alma, who pleads with the people to allow Christ to change them: “But that ye would humble yourselves before the Lord, and call on his holy name, and watch and pray continually, that ye may not be tempted above that which ye can bear, and thus be led by the Holy Spirit, *becoming* humble, meek, submissive, patient, full of love and all long-suffering” (Alma 13:28; emphasis added). This passage further expands on how the influence of the Holy Ghost allows the redemptive process of sanctification and transformation to occur. Like King Benjamin, Alma notes that as we choose to place ourselves under the influence of the Holy Ghost we *become* Saints. It is not a one-time event but a lifelong process. As we continually choose to follow this process of faith, repentance, and obedience, we choose to be redeemed.

### CHOOSING REDEMPTION: OUR AGENCY

Even though Christ has worked out our redemption, we must want to be redeemed. It is as though we are individually in dark prison cells, bound in the chains of our sins, weaknesses, and fears. The Savior stands at the door, pleading with us to come to Him, assuring us that the chains and the prison will not hold us fast because He has paid our ransom price—He has redeemed us. The choice to believe His voice and to act in faith is the choice to be redeemed. The price has been paid, and we truly are free to leave the prison of our fallen state through the power of the Atonement. But redemption is not complete until we exercise our faith and repentance and come unto Him.

As we recognize that we must choose to accept the Lord’s

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invitation to “partake of . . . the power of his redemption” (Omni 1:26), we realize that our spiritual state is in our own hands. The responsibility of our agency should not, however, be mistaken for redeeming or saving ourselves. The Book of Mormon teachings about the relationship of the Fall and the Redemption make this abundantly clear. Remembering that our sins and weaknesses are truly a captivity and bondage is essential to remembering that redemption is “only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ” (Helaman 5:9). The Book of Mormon consistently teaches that hope for deliverance from spiritual captivity comes only from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. It also, significantly, explains how our faith in Christ will lead us to repent and obey (see Helaman 13:14; Alma 34:15–17).<sup>8</sup> Choosing faith in Christ is choosing redemption. As we trust in His promise that He has power to redeem us, we will repent of all our sins. Our repentance delivers us from the prison of our sinful state. This redemption occurs, however, only to the extent that we trust in and obey His voice pleading with us to come unto Him and “be perfected in Him” (Moroni 10:32).

If we choose not to listen to His voice, the Book of Mormon prophets warn us that someday we will acknowledge that only we are accountable for our state. Alma explains that “if we have hardened our hearts against the word” then at some day “we must come forth and stand before him in his glory, and in his power” and “acknowledge to our everlasting shame” that He is just, merciful, and “has all power to save every man that believeth on his name and bringeth forth fruit meet for repentance” (Alma 12:13, 15). The power of redemption is available. It is essential that we know that Christ “has all power to save every man” because Satan wants so badly for us to feel unredeemable. It is also essential that we know what this redemption means. It is not to be redeemed in our sins, but from them, and that is why it is only available to those who “[believe] on his name and [bring] forth fruit meet for repentance.”

The Lord Himself testified that we must individually choose redemption. He told Alma that at the Judgment Day there will be those that shall “know that I am the Lord their God, that I am their Redeemer; but they *would not* be redeemed” (Mosiah 26:26; emphasis

added). If we are not willing to receive the redemption of having our natures sanctified, then it will be as if there was no redemption made. The hope for each of us is in realizing that the Redemption has been made, the price has been paid, and the power is available. Satan wants us to think that our fallen state is just the way we are. Christ's witness in the Book of Mormon is that we can be redeemed from our carnal state. We do not have to stay in the prison of our sins and weaknesses, but we can move forward with confidence in His power to redeem.

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#### NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 216.
2. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book), 4:461.
3. In the ancient Near East, a redeemer was someone who paid a ransom price to buy another out of slavery. The image of the Lord as the Redeemer of Israel has a very developed role in the Old Testament. Here we see that the Lord's ability to act as the kinsman-redeemer of Israel is tied to His family relationship to Israel created by adoptive covenant. This background clearly informs the way that redemption is discussed in the Book of Mormon. What the Book of Mormon adds to the biblical framework is a clearer understanding of the sense to which this individual redemption is from the bondage of sin and that it comes as people choose to apply the Atonement in their lives. For an overview of the Old Testament foundation for the Book of Mormon imagery, see Jennifer C. Lane, "The Lord Will Redeem His People: Adoptive Covenant and Redemption in the Old Testament," in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 298–310. In addition to the clearly Christ-centered explanation of spiritual redemption in the Book of Mormon, the explanation of Christ's atoning sacrifice as the price of redemption is also found in the New Testament (see Jennifer C. Lane, "Hebrew Concepts of Adoption and Redemption in the Writings of Paul," in *The Apostle Paul: His Life and His Testimony*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994], 80–95). I develop the idea of how covenant redemption can be understood in an individual's life in "The Redemption of Abraham," in *The Book of Abraham: Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, *Studies in the Book of Abraham*, vol. 3 (Provo, UT: ISPART, 2005), 167–74.
4. On this subject, President Ezra Taft Benson observed that "just as a man does not really desire food until he is hungry, so he does not desire the salvation of Christ until he knows why he needs Christ. No one adequately and properly knows why he needs Christ until he understands and accepts the doctrine of the

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Fall and its effect upon all mankind. And no other book in the world explains this vital doctrine nearly as well as the Book of Mormon” (“Gospel Classics: The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants,” *Ensign*, January 2005, 27). While there is no question that the doctrines of the Fall and Christ’s Redemption are also clearly and emphatically taught in the New Testament, I believe it is in the Book of Mormon that the explanation of the relationship between the Fall and the Redemption has a clarity and consistency that is unmatched in any other book of scripture. While this paper can only examine highlights from the discussion of prophets in the Book of Mormon, I hope that it can give a sense of the depth and consistency with which these topics are both taught and illustrated.

5. Neal A. Maxwell, “Deny Yourselves of All Ungodliness,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 68.

6. A helpful discussion of justification and sanctification can be found in Elder D. Todd Christofferson’s article “Justification and Sanctification,” *Ensign*, June 2001, 18–25.

7. David A. Bednar, “That We May Always Have His Spirit to Be with Us,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 30.

8. For a more complete development of the relationship of faith and repentance in the Book of Mormon, see my discussion in “Faith unto Repentance: The Fulness of the Simple Way,” in *The Fulness of the Gospel: Foundational Teachings from the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 181–93.