

## Parents Teaching Children to Believe in Christ “An Echo of a Celestial Pattern”

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*I will give unto you a pattern in all things, that ye may not be deceived. (Doctrine and Covenants 52:14)*

*Therefore, he caused that his sons should be gathered together, that he might give unto them every one his charge, separately, concerning the things pertaining unto righteousness. (Alma 35:16)*

**T**he repeated practice of parents teaching their children to believe in Christ is evident throughout all scripture, emphasizing a pattern of how a belief in Christ “shall go from generation to generation as long as the earth shall stand; . . . according to the will and pleasure of God” (2 Nephi 25:22). The adversary is hard at work, discouraging and distracting parents from this sacred duty to teach their children, deceiving them by minimizing the doctrinal significance of this divinely established pattern. This pattern, which is grounded in

the intergenerational interaction from parent\* to child, is not accidental. It is not simply a biological byproduct that wires parents to teach and protect their offspring, nor is this behavior just the result of the various cultural influences and social expectations. Such social and cultural structures have changed throughout time, yet the dictate to teach religious practices and beliefs to one's children appears repeatedly despite these differing contexts. Children learning about the Savior from their parents is an "echo of a celestial pattern"<sup>1</sup> that was first exemplified premortally by heavenly parents. As with all of God's commandments, the command for parents to follow this divine pattern (Doctrine and Covenants 93:40; Moses 6:58–62) is connected to the development of godly attributes, returning to his presence, and receiving eternal joy.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, it is central to the exaltation of all God's children.

A frequently referenced scriptural example of this pattern involves the younger Alma teaching his sons Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton as recorded in Alma chapters 36–42. The generational influence produced by Alma as he followed this divine pattern to be obedient to the command to teach his sons "to do good" (Alma

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\* *Teaching children* the gospel is the root of a divine pattern. While the term *parent* is used throughout this chapter, I am cognizant of the fact that many individuals in various family and nonfamily circumstances participate in this divine pattern and share an individualized witness of the Savior with children. In some situations, such as fostering, adopting, step-parenting, and grandparenting, it is not the biological parent who takes on this duty. There are many that have the advantage of being present in the child's daily life, ideally and uniquely positioned to be an example of living the gospel through an ongoing process of hope and repentance, faith and forgiveness, clinging to covenants, and enduring to the end. These exemplars may include other family members such as aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters; widowed parents, single parents, or divorced parents; or other adults who are not part of the child's immediate or extended family. Thus the content of this chapter is not meant to be exclusive to biological parents in a two-parent home. My goal is to emphasize how *parents* are uniquely commanded to emulate this pattern of intergenerational teaching, but the principles and implications can apply to all in teaching children to believe in Christ.

39:12) cannot be overstated. Scholars have mapped Alma's influence through a four-hundred-year span,<sup>3</sup> visually emphasizing the powerful reach and generational influence of parents laboring diligently to convince their children of the true Messiah. Alma's obedience and motivation to teach his sons to believe in Christ are significant not only because of the doctrinal significance of this messianic message, but also particularly because of *how* this message was delivered—through the divine and eternally significant pattern of a parent teaching a child.

But why must this messianic message be delivered by parents, especially considering that all parents, as humans, are imperfect? Is there something unique found in the act of earthly parents<sup>4</sup> teaching their children about the “coming of Christ . . . to declare glad tidings of salvation” (Alma 39:15)? What is distinctive about parents “prepar[ing] the minds of their children to hear the word at the time of his coming” (39:16)? Using the doctrinal importance of this celestial pattern as a lens to examine the experience of Alma teaching his sons, I will consider the significance of why parents are commanded to echo this divine pattern to teach their children to believe in Christ.

First, I will address the doctrinal importance of this pattern. Next, using the doctrinal importance of this pattern as a lens, I will introduce the experience of Alma teaching his sons and will examine the motivation for his obedience to this pattern. Finally, emerging from this unique review of Alma's experience teaching his sons, I will offer two possible conclusions: (1) the teaching of deliverance by a delivered or converted parent is by divine design, and (2) the exalting purpose of parents teaching children occurs as saving memories of the Savior are created and passed down from generation to generation. By looking closely at the experiences of Alma in teaching his sons about Christ, we can find inspiration and encouragement for our own attempts to emulate this divine pattern by teaching our children to believe in Christ.

## A Divinely Established Pattern for the Purpose of Exaltation

Before examining Alma's motivation to obey the commandment to teach his sons, I will briefly review this celestial pattern of parents teaching their children to believe in Christ in order to establish its doctrinal importance as a commandment for the exaltation of God's children.

### *A divinely established pattern*

The pattern of parents teaching their children to believe in Christ was first established by our heavenly parents. As taught by Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "[Families] are the *order* of heaven. They are an *echo of a celestial pattern* and an emulation of God's eternal family."<sup>5</sup> Central to this order of heaven, heavenly parents taught their spirit sons and daughters<sup>6</sup> their "first lessons" regarding the plan of salvation and the centrality of the Savior in that plan.<sup>7</sup> In this loving relational context of parental teaching and guidance, spirit children could choose to follow the Savior, support the plan,<sup>8</sup> and ultimately come to this earth where they "could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny as heirs of eternal life."<sup>9</sup> Echoing this celestial pattern and central to gaining earthly experience in preparation to return to his presence, God's children learn their first mortal lessons from their earthly parents. Thus this heavenly order provides a pattern of parentage<sup>10</sup> that earthly parents echo not only in the procreation of children and living in families, but also in the pattern of parents teaching their children about the Father's plan and to believe in Christ.

This pattern was first implemented in mortality by Adam and Eve after they had been driven out of the garden and were obedient to the "the first commandment that God gave to [them which] pertained to their potential for parenthood as husband and wife."<sup>11</sup> Not only were they obedient to the command to multiply and replenish the earth, but they also demonstrated their obedience as they

directed the learning of their children concerning the Father's plan. The Lord taught Adam that as his children "begin to grow up" in this fallen world, "sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter" as they learn to "know good from evil; wherefore they are agents unto themselves" (Moses 6:55–56). Hence God established that the spiritual development of Adam's children centered around each individual's ability to understand and experience both good and evil, and then to exercise their own agency in their choices between these two options. "Being left to choose good or evil" and needing to know "what manner to look forward to his Son for redemption" (Alma 13:2–3), God gave Adam and Eve a "law and commandment" to teach their children to repent, believe in Jesus Christ, and come to know the "plan of salvation" and "to teach these things freely unto [their] children" (Moses 6:56–62).

This pattern of parentage, which was established by heavenly parents and introduced to this mortal experience through Adam and Eve, remains in force today.<sup>12</sup> Its significance is evident in the adversarial influence to distract parents so that they "neglect to teach and train their children to have faith in Christ and be spiritually born again."<sup>13</sup> In response to the increasing adversarial attacks on faith and family, President Russell M. Nelson acknowledged the necessity of "counterstrategies and proactive plans" by making significant "organizational adjustments" in order to implement a "home-centered and Church-supported plan to learn doctrine, strengthen faith, and foster greater personal worship."<sup>14</sup> With this historic announcement and supporting teachings, the divine parental duty of teaching children the doctrine of Christ was reaffirmed as a central pattern in the Father's plan.

### *A pattern that leads to the exaltation of all*

Given that parents teaching children is a divine pattern established by our heavenly parents that earthly parents are to echo, it is important to emphasize the reason behind this divine pattern: the exaltation of *both* the parent and the child. "To be exalted—or to gain

exaltation—refers to the highest state of happiness and glory in the celestial realm.”<sup>15</sup> It refers to the potential to become like Heavenly Father, “heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ . . . [being] glorified together” (Romans 8:17). As spirit children, our “highest aspiration is to become like [our heavenly parents],”<sup>16</sup> striving to emulate them, including the sacred duty of teaching children. Hence “family life here is the schoolroom in which we prepare for family life there. And to give us the opportunity for family life there was and is the purpose of creation.”<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, the diligent labor of parents teaching their children is not solely centered on the exaltation of the child but rather is also essential for the spiritual growth of the parent. The exalting purpose of this celestial pattern does not occur when a mother or father mechanically copies an arbitrary template in the hope that their child will “just happen” to believe in a transcendent force by mere exposure to the idea. As mothers and fathers exercise their own faith and trust in Heavenly Father by striving to follow his fatherly example, they are undergoing their own rebirth. In turn, their diligent labor is essential in their child’s learning to believe in a Savior who will in turn be key to their own rebirth. In essence, parenting becomes a redemptive experience that is central to the earthly experiences of both parent and child.

This redemptive and exalting purpose is taught in Doctrine and Covenants 93, which is considered one of the exaltation sections, as it describes “how to come into the Lord’s presence and become like him.”<sup>18</sup> Historian Steven Harper states that “section 93 is a masterpiece of parenting from a most concerned Father and a commandment to go and do likewise.”<sup>19</sup> The Lord explains, “I give unto you these sayings that you may understand and know how to worship, and know what you worship, that you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:19). As the Lord teaches what it means to worship and receive his fullness, church leaders are commanded to go and do likewise with their own children: “But I have commanded you to bring

up your children in light and truth” (93:40). The Father then lovingly rebukes members of the First Presidency and other leaders for not teaching their children light and truth. In these words, it appears that Heavenly Father is emphasizing that one’s worship of the Father and receiving his fullness are linked to the process of parents following the divine pattern of teaching their children how to worship the Father in preparation for them to receive of his fullness.

Referring to the context when Doctrine and Covenants 93 was received, historian Richard Bushman further explains this exalting purpose in parents teaching their children:

Exaltation also meant intelligence, equated by the revelations with light and truth. In a sense, the central purpose of life was to absorb light and truth. . . . Since the glory of God was intelligence, growing in intelligence was progress in godliness. In a characteristic transition, the concluding verses of the May revelation descend from the heavens into the everyday concerns of Joseph and his friends. The Lord scolds them for not keeping order in their families. Joseph is told, “You have not kept the commandments, and must needs stand rebuked before the Lord.” Sidney Rigdon and Newel Whitney are admonished for not keeping better track of their children. Ordinary daily concerns mingle with the grand structure of the universe. *While taking care of their children, it was implied, the Saints could be growing in glory and intelligence.*<sup>20</sup>

Thus, as in any context where one bears an individualized witness of the Savior with another human being, the command for parents to teach their children to believe in Christ will not only bless the child with the realization of their divine destiny, but it is also central to parents gaining earthly experience in their progression and growing in intelligence toward their becoming heavenly parents and heirs of eternal life.

The doctrinal importance of this exalting pattern will now be used as a lens to introduce Alma 36–42 as Alma teaches his sons.

This established lens will also be used to examine Alma's motivation for obeying the command to teach his sons of the Savior.

## Alma 36–42: A Divine Pattern of Parents Teaching Children

Woven throughout the Book of Mormon and other holy scripture is the pattern of parents teaching their children by word and example about the plan of salvation and the central role of Jesus Christ in that plan. One could surmise that the central and unique message of the Book of Mormon, the “convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ,”<sup>21</sup> is primarily delivered in the parent-child relational context. Beginning with Lehi and his sons and ending with Moroni, the son of Mormon, their writings are teachings that are delivered within the context of parents laboring diligently to persuade their children to “believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God . . . that [their] children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:23, 26).

The longest chain in the Book of Mormon of parent-to-child intergenerational influence begins with Alma<sub>1</sub> (priest of King Noah and convert of the prophet Abinadi) and his son, Alma.<sup>22</sup> Mormon included more about the life and ministry of Alma than any other Book of Mormon prophet. However, “the centrality of Alma’s life is not limited simply to chronology or [number of pages]. . . . The significance of his life is in the course that it took. . . . The life of the younger Alma portrays the gospel’s beauty and *reach* and *power* perhaps more than any other in holy scripture.”<sup>23</sup> This powerful reach begins as fathers bring their sons “to the knowledge of the truth, yea, to the knowledge of their Redeemer” (Mosiah 27:36; Alma 36–42). Their conversion influenced generation upon generation, spanning over a four-hundred-year lineage. As noted earlier, scholars have mapped this generation-to-generation influence,<sup>24</sup> visually emphasizing the divine reach of parents striving to convince their children of the true Messiah. This lineage includes Helaman, leader of the two



thousand stripling warriors; Nephi, church leader during the Savior's birth and crucifixion and the first apostle called by the Savior during his ministry in the Americas (along with Nephi's brother Timothy and son Jonas); and culminating with Ammaron, who instructed ten-year-old Mormon regarding his divine mission to gather and abridge the many ancient plates, which resulted in another testament of Jesus Christ written for our day. Thus, the generational influence of their conversion reaches even into our modern times.

Given this powerful and far-reaching generational influence, Alma's motivations to obey the commandment to teach his sons can be seen as an empowering example to parents today. Understanding Alma's motivations to follow this divine pattern can help all parents avoid adversarial deceptions and be an inspiration and motivation in echoing this exalting pattern of teaching and learning of Christ in the context of this divinely ordained order of heaven.

### **Alma's Motivation to Obey a Divine Pattern**

At the conclusion of Alma's mission to the Zoramites, Mormon describes him as being "grieved" and "sorrowful" for the wickedness and hardheartedness of the Zoramites. "Seeing that the hearts of the people began to wax hard, and that they began to be offended because of the strictness of the word" (Alma 35:15), he might have acted as many prophets have done after experiencing discouragement in missionary efforts and prayed to God for his own comfort and for the souls of those who would not listen. Instead, with that heavy heart, he calls for his sons Corianton and Shiblon (who were with him during this mission) and Helaman (who had stayed in Zarahemla) to give them individually his "charge . . . concerning the things pertaining unto righteousness" (35:16). What was it that motivated Alma to gather his sons and teach them? This motivation seems to go beyond the discouragement of missionary efforts, which two of his sons experienced with him. In looking at Alma's interview with Corianton, it appears that two integrated or shared possibilities are important to consider

as to what motivated Alma to have separate one-on-one interviews with his sons at the conclusion of his mission to the Zoramites.

The first motivation may have been simple obedience to a command from God to teach his children “to do good” (Alma 39:12). Second, the motivation to be obedient to this commandment seems to have been influenced both by Alma’s awareness of the potential negative generational influence of Corianton’s transgression, coupled with Alma’s own memory of the negative generational influence caused by his wickedness and rebellion when he was “a great hinderment to the prosperity of the church of God” (Mosiah 27:9). This negative generational influence is set in motion when parents are led away from believing in a Savior. In turn, these unbelieving parents do not “prepare the minds of their children” to learn about the Savior (Alma 39:16). Although a parent who believes in and teaches about the Savior is not guaranteed to have believing children, as in the cases of Alma, and his son Alma, the generational influence of an unbelieving parent is manifested throughout scripture. Thus it seems that a dual motivation for Alma to obey the Lord’s command to firmly invite his sons “to do good” is driven at least in part by their capacity “to lead away the hearts of many people to destruction” (Alma 39:12) and by Alma’s memory of his own actions when he was an unbeliever (Mosiah 27:8), which led many away from their belief in a Savior (Alma 36:12–14). A closer look at Alma’s interview with Corianton further demonstrates these parallel motivations.

At the beginning of Alma’s visit with Corianton, it seems that Alma’s heavy heart and sorrow resulted primarily from Corianton’s sexual transgression (Alma 39:3). When considering Corianton’s *iniquity*, however, it appears that Alma’s concerns go beyond his transgression. As wrong as this conduct was, what caused equal or maybe even greater grief and sorrow for Alma involved how Corianton’s conduct influenced the Zoramites, who had already become dissenters from the church of Christ (Alma 31:8). “Behold, O my son, how great *iniquity* ye brought upon the Zoramites; for when they saw your conduct they would not believe in my words” (Alma 39:11; emphasis

added throughout). Subsequently, his iniquity not only impeded the Zoramite people from repenting but also hindered the Zoramite parents from teaching their children about the redemption that comes from a Savior (Alma 39:16). Alma commands Corianton to “refrain from [his] *iniquities* . . . that [he] lead away the hearts of no more to do wickedly,” exhorting him to return to the people, acknowledge his wrongdoing, and *repair*<sup>25</sup> the wrong he had done (39:12–13). Alma then seems to give an out-of-context admonition not to seek after riches or the vain things of the world because they will not matter after this life (39:14); he follows with another seemingly out-of-context teaching about the coming of Christ to take away the sins of the world and “declare glad tidings of salvation unto his people” (39:15). He also reminds Corianton that the ministry he was called to was “to declare these glad tidings unto this people . . . that salvation might come unto them, that they may *prepare the minds of their children* to hear the word at the time of his coming” (39:16). This counsel clarifies Alma’s own perspective on gospel teaching, which includes a parental obligation of not simply teaching the gospel, but *preparing*<sup>26</sup> their children to hear and apply the gospel.

Interestingly, this fatherly counsel parallels the experience of Alma in leading away many to spiritual destruction (Alma 36:14), likewise impeding parents who followed or were influenced by him from teaching their children about the coming of Christ and his redemptive mission. Following his repentance and conversion, Alma and the sons of Mosiah went among those they led astray, “zealously striving to repair all the injuries which they had done to the church, confessing all their sins. . . . They were instruments in the hands of God in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth, yea, to the knowledge of their Redeemer. . . . They did *publish peace* . . . [and] *good tidings of good*” (Mosiah 27:35–37). The memory of this experience seems to guide the fatherly counsel he is giving his son to repent by striving to repair the damage done and by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ among those that were injured by their actions.<sup>27</sup> The seemingly out-of-context counsel to refrain from seeking after riches

could possibly reflect Alma's recall of how he was "an idolatrous man" and how riches and vain things of the world motivated him to seek to destroy the church and to spiritually murder or lead many away from a saving belief in Christ (Mosiah 27:8). Again, given Alma's similar iniquities, his other out-of-context teaching concerning the coming of Christ (Alma 39:15) parallels his own experience of rebellion against God (Mosiah 27:11) motivated by an unbelief in the coming of Christ.

With these parallel experiences and possibly similar doctrinal struggles, Alma perceives the thoughts of his son Corianton, who is overcome by the significance of his iniquities as he struggles to comprehend the redemptive power of a Savior and wonders "why these things should be known so long beforehand" (Alma 39:17). Drawing from similar experience with iniquities and subsequent repentance, Alma replies, "Behold, I say unto you, is not a soul at this time as precious unto God as a soul will be at the time of his coming? Is it not as necessary that the plan of redemption should be made known unto this people *as well as unto their children?*" (39:17–18). Alma's inclusion of the children here alongside their parents is instructive in that it advocates for gospel teaching to an explicitly intergenerational audience. What follows in chapters 40–42 is a perceptive father drawing from his own experience and teaching his son about the plan of salvation, Christ's role in the plan, and his glad tidings to redeem all mankind. Alma urges his son to do as he did—to believe in the coming of the Son of God, return to his ministry to teach of the coming of Christ, and repair<sup>28</sup> the injuries of his iniquities so that the generational influence of parents teaching their children of Christ could continue. In turn, Corianton sees the urgency of his call "to preach the word unto this people [and] . . . declare the word with truth and soberness, [to] bring souls unto repentance, that the great plan of mercy may have claim upon them" (Alma 42:31).

Thus it seems likely that part of Alma's motivation to obey the command to teach his sons involves their potential negative generational influence in leading many away from a belief in Christ. At the same time, Alma's motivation to gather his sons is driven by

remembrance of his own iniquities and deliverance. These parallel motivations seem to have guided his admonitions and teachings to Corianton and were clearly on his mind when he first met with Helaman, sharing how his soul was delivered from being “racked with eternal torment” as he remembered all his “sins and iniquities” (Alma 36:12–13). As he shares the sacred experience of remembering the words of his father “concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world” (36:17), Alma appears to be motivated to create similar redemptive or saving memories with his sons so they can experience the same deliverance he experienced. Instead of giving in to a temptation to feel that his past sins disqualify him to teach his sons, he is empowered by his deliverance and conversion to teach the same glad tidings so that his sons can replicate the same divine pattern with their own posterity. With their conversion, they can preach the gospel to others so they can prepare the minds of their children for the coming of Christ (Alma 39:16).

In essence, as Alma teaches his sons to believe in Christ, he is continuing his own forsaking and change reflected in the retelling of his miraculous deliverance and conversion. By gathering his sons to give each one “his charge . . . concerning the things pertaining unto righteousness” (Alma 35:16), he continues to participate in the process of rebirth and exaltation to become like his Heavenly Father. The following will further expand on these insights and the implications for parents today as they strive to echo this divine pattern.

## **Implications of Alma’s Motivation to Obey the Command to Teach His Sons**

By examining Alma’s motivation to obey the command to teach his sons using the lens of the doctrinal significance of this celestial pattern, two implications emerge that can inspire and motivate parents today to teach their children: (1) by divine design the message of deliverance is to be shared by a delivered or converted parent, and (2) the

purpose of this divine pattern is for the exaltation of both parent and child as they create and pass on saving memories of Jesus Christ.

*Teaching the message of deliverance by a converted parent*

An implication that emerges from Alma's obedience and motivation to teach his sons is that the reach of his fatherly message of deliverance is extended when one considers the context provided by Alma's own spiritual rebirth. Alma's invitation to his sons to remember the Savior and turn to him has greater power and meaning from a parent who has both sinned and repented, and whose message to his sons occurs as an ongoing *receiver* of the Savior's redemptive love. In the following section I will demonstrate that his prior iniquities and subsequent redemption do not disqualify Alma from teaching his sons but in fact enable him to teach and witness with greater power. In turn, parents are reminded that the command for imperfect parents to teach their sons and daughters to believe in Christ is by divine design.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into great detail about Alma's character prior to his conversion, it is important to briefly acknowledge who Alma was prior to his conversion in order to appreciate his generational influence as a converted parent. A central part of this understanding begins with his father, Alma<sub>f</sub>, who was among the wicked priests of Noah and who experienced a mighty change as he listened to the words of Abinadi. With his conversion, Alma<sub>f</sub> brought many into the church and became a spiritual leader and judge of the people. During all this, his son is present in some way. Sometime while observing and watching the change in his father and his becoming a leader in the church, Alma joined with the group of "unbelievers" (Mosiah 27:8). Mormon does not offer much in the way of the interaction between father and son, but what we do know is that this group of unbelievers troubled Alma<sub>f</sub> greatly (Mosiah 26:10). One can imagine Alma<sub>f</sub>'s personal heartache and anguish that led him to pray with the power of a parent, which in turn ultimately led to an angel appearing to his son (Mosiah 27:11, 14). This

is a lesson in and of itself of the power and generational influence of a converted parent, not just through explicit teaching or sending an angel (Alma 39:19) but through pleading with the Father in prayer that his son would believe in Christ and experience the same rebirth that he experienced.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland effectively summarizes what we know from scripture regarding the preconversion Alma:

We do not know how sinful the young Alma really was, but the scripture records he was “very wicked and an idolatrous man” (Mosiah 27:8), who, with the sons of Mosiah, was “the very vilest of sinners” (Mosiah 28:4). We know he conscientiously worked at destroying the church of God, “stealing away the hearts of the people” and causing dissension among them (Mosiah 27:9). He was in every way “a great hinderment to the prosperity of the church of God” (Mosiah 27:9). Years later, the younger Alma recounted these events in order to save his own sons from walking such a painful path: “I had rebelled against my God, and . . . had not kept his holy commandments. Yea, and I had murdered many of his children, or rather led them away unto destruction; yea, . . . so great had been my iniquities, that the very thought of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror” (Alma 36:13–14).<sup>29</sup>

With that understanding of Alma prior to his conversion, it is logical to assume that Alma himself could have questioned his ability to teach his sons given his time as an “unbeliever” (Mosiah 27:8). In fact, any parent might wonder how an *imperfect* parent is qualified to follow this celestial pattern established by *perfect* parents to teach their children to believe in Christ. Premortally, God’s spirit children had not yet experienced the Savior’s redemptive love according to the flesh (1 Nephi 19:6; 2 Nephi 4:27; Alma 7:12–13); thus they relied on and trusted in their perfect parents and their teachings of a redemptive plan that included the covenant of a promised redeemer.

In the case of heavenly parents, they taught this doctrine of Christ as the *givers* of the gift of grace and the “conditions of repentance” (Helaman 5:11), and consequently, their children accepted their plan and desired to come to this mortal experience.

However, as their children came to this earthly experience, they were physically and spiritually separated from their heavenly parents. A veil of forgetfulness was drawn over the minds of their children so they would not remember God’s plan. Central to the Father’s plan, this forgetfulness allows these children to learn to use their agency and to exercise faith in the Savior.<sup>30</sup> Without heavenly parents to teach them, how are their children to be awakened to the goodness of our heavenly parents and come to know the “messenger of the covenant” (3 Nephi 24:1)? Earthly parents are far from perfect, so how are they qualified to teach the plan of redemption? How does an imperfect parent’s promise of a Savior have any credibility when they themselves are striving to believe in Christ? Cognizant of their own weaknesses and imperfections, earthly parents may question or doubt whether they are competent enough or have sufficient faith to take on such a daunting responsibility of teaching their children to believe in Christ. This may lead some parents to feel hypocritical as they encourage their children to look to the Savior for a remission of sins while simultaneously questioning their own faith in the influence of Christ’s redemptive power on them as imperfect parents. The adversary can deceive parents by leveraging their discouragement and feelings of being unqualified. Consequently, parents can be tempted to minimize the significance of their efforts and neglect their sacred duty to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ to their children, thus satisfying the adversary’s ongoing efforts to oppose the Father’s plan.

Yet as part of the Father’s plan from the beginning, he provided a way for fallen parents to be uniquely qualified to teach the Father’s children to believe in his plan and a Savior. Knowing of their weakness (Ether 12:27) as well as the adversary’s efforts to destroy faith and trust in God and his ways, an all-knowing Heavenly Father



provided “a pattern in all things” so his children would not be deceived (Doctrine and Covenants 52:14). His established pattern is for earthly parents, who rely on the Savior’s grace and humble themselves through repentance (Ether 12:27), to be the primary teachers of the plan of redemption during this “probationary time” (Alma 42:4). As part of the Father’s plan, earthly parents are “cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord; . . . [becoming] subjects to follow after their own will” (42:7). During this “probationary state” (42:10, 13), God relies on fallen parents who choose to have an ongoing redemptive relationship with the Savior to teach the plan of redemption to their children as they “begin to grow up” in this fallen world and experience sin (Moses 6:55–56). As witnesses of Christ from a position of personally experiencing the power of the atonement, earthly parents are given the charge to teach their children to believe in Christ and to know where to turn for a remission of their sins (2 Nephi 25:23, 26). Thus, as a divinely established pattern, converted parents are to teach the doctrine of Christ not as a theoretical or abstract concept, but as actual *receivers* of the atonement of Jesus Christ.

The first example of converted parents teaching their children occurred when, upon reflecting on their transgression and joy of redemption, Adam and Eve “made all things known [regarding their redemption] unto their sons and their daughters” (Moses 5:10–12). They were commanded to follow a divinely established pattern to “teach these things freely unto [their] children” (Moses 6:58). Beginning with Adam and Eve, the pattern was divinely instituted that the redemption parents experience could be shared with their sons and daughters; otherwise, the purpose of redemption falls short (Alma 42:30–32). Children will come to trust and rely on their converted parents as they did with their heavenly parents. As President Henry B. Eyring has taught, “Though earthly families are far from perfect, they give God’s children the best chance to be welcomed to the world with the only love on earth that comes close to what we felt in heaven—parental love. Families are also the best way to preserve

and pass on moral virtues and true principles that are most likely to lead us back to God's presence."<sup>31</sup>

This is accomplished as parents labor diligently to submit to their Heavenly Father by putting off the natural parent and becoming a saintly parent through their own experiences with the atonement of Jesus Christ (Mosiah 3:19). This experience qualifies them to meekly and humbly testify of the Savior to their children with power and authority. Unlike heavenly parents, mortal parents do not have a perfect child to answer the demands of justice and provide infinite mercy. Children come to believe and trust their earthly parents as they observe them laboring diligently to believe in Christ and receive redemption (2 Nephi 25:23, 26). It was not the visit of an angel alone that led to Alma's rebirth; that visit was accompanied by the memory of his father laboring diligently to repent from his wicked ways as a priest of Noah, hearing of his deliverance, and observing his leadership in bringing many to Christ.

Although the redemptive experiences of others outside the family unit can be faith promoting and can motivate individuals to endure and keep trying, it is the labor of a converted parent who is enduring their own pathway of spiritual rebirth that will invite a child to believe in Christ. As parents labor diligently to "trust in God" (Alma 36:6), they, like no other, are able to invite their child to "do as [they] have done" (36:2). Elder Holland emphasizes the power of this message of deliverance being taught in the context of family relationships stating, "I want to suggest to you that . . . this relationship with each other, with your husband and wife and your children is your great chance to say what you want to say about the Atonement. What you believe about the Atonement is not going to be said in a classroom. . . . *What you will say about your understanding of the Atonement will come in your human relationships.*"<sup>32</sup>

This diligent labor of a loving parent is exemplified by Alma. Given the chiasmic repetition and "masterful harmony" of Alma 36,<sup>33</sup> the emphasis of Alma as a converted parent further reinforces the power and reach of the pinnacle of his message to his son Helaman—the

Savior Jesus Christ (Alma 36:17–18). Alma desires his son to hear and learn from his experience (36:1, 3, 30), keep the commandments (36:1, 30), and do as he has done (36:2, 30) by remembering the captivity and deliverance of their fathers, including his own deliverance (36:2, 27–29). In so doing, Alma was teaching his son Helaman the need to trust God (36:3, 27), rely on God for deliverance (36:4, 26), and experience a rebirth as his father did (36:5, 26), as well as being delivered from the “pains of a damned soul” and experiencing “joy as exceeding as was [the] pain” (36:16, 20). This purposeful and artistic repetition emphasizes that this message to remember and cry unto Jesus Christ (36:17, 18) was given by a loving and delivered father. These same themes are echoed through Alma’s remaining teachings to Helaman in chapter 37, to Shiblon in chapter 38, and to Corianton in chapters 39–42 as he lovingly pleads with his sons to learn from his experiences of deliverance, to repent, and to keep the commandments.

As one reads his fatherly one-on-one counsel through the lens of Alma’s own deliverance, it is clear that this experience empowers Alma as a father to deliver a message of faith in the Savior Jesus Christ and of repentance. Alma, who has attempted to “retain a remembrance” of the merciful deliverance of both him and his father, demonstrates that there is a unique power in a delivered or converted parent in urging a child to “do as I have done, in remembering the captivity [and deliverance] of our fathers” (Alma 36:2, 28–29).

In summary, the diligent labor of imperfect parents to put off the natural parent and learn to rely on the atonement of Jesus Christ is what qualifies and enables parents to “persuade [their] children . . . to believe in Christ . . . that [their] children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:23, 26). It is a divine pattern established and exemplified by heavenly parents.

*Exaltation of both parent and child by creating and passing on saving memories*

Another important concept that emerges from reviewing Alma's obedience and motivation to teach his sons as a converted parent is the creation and passing on of saving memories. These saving memories play a significant role in the exaltation of both parent and child. Saving memories, when remembered, have a saving or rescuing purpose to them. Many fathers throughout the Book of Mormon—especially Alma, who admonished each of his sons to remember nearly a dozen times throughout Alma 36–42—urge their children to remember. Alma's emphasis on active remembrance can reasonably be attributed to his own experience with the salvific power he found in remembering the words of his own loving father regarding Jesus Christ. In the depths of mental anguish, caught up in the unending memory of his own sins and guilt, Alma "caught hold" on the memory of his father's teachings. As he actively remembered the existence of the Savior spoken by his father, he was rescued from the "gall of bitterness" and the chains of spiritual death as he experienced the saving joy and light of the mercy of the Savior (Alma 36:18–20).

A similar experience is found in the story of Enos. As he "wrestle[d]" with and "hungered" for his own salvation, he remembered "the words which [he] had often heard [his] father speak concerning eternal life, and the joy of the saints," and it "sunk deep into [his] heart" (Enos 1:2–3). This memory led Enos to kneel in prayer and cry for repentance. It is reasonable to assume that both Alma and Enos had many talks with their fathers, receiving counsel and hearing testimonies of the Savior. In both of these cases, it was a parent's labor that created a saving memory as they were taught "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Enos 1:1–2; Ephesians 6:4). These experiences of creating and passing on saving memories further demonstrate why parents are the divinely sanctioned channel not only for bringing spirit children of our heavenly parents to this earth,<sup>34</sup> but also as the sacred conduit for cultivating a fertile ground

(Matthew 13:8) for planting and nurturing seeds of faith, where both children and parents can experiment upon a “particle of faith” in the word of God (Alma 32:27) that will eventually lead to faith and trust in the “Word of God.”<sup>35</sup>

As parents labor diligently to seek for heavenly help in teaching their children, that labor can be as empowering and far-reaching as a well-articulated sermon that a child remembers during times of darkness and despair. This labor of creating saving memories, which includes cultivating, planting, and nurturing (Jacob 5), not only blesses the emerging seed but also the ever-learning gardener. The purpose and outcome of parents’ diligently teaching their children to believe in Christ is not just a believing child. The outcome also includes the spiritual growth of the laboring parent who dungs and prunes (Jacob 5) multiple times, who collapses in the field crying out to her Father, “what could I have done more?” (Jacob 5:41, 47, 49).

Teaching a child whom to turn to for a remission of sins does not simply happen from a well-planned family home evening lesson but occurs as a child observes his mother and father turning to the Savior to overcome the tendencies of a natural parent and to become a more saint-like parent (Mosiah 3:19). This labor of believing in Christ invites the imperfect and agonizing parent to turn their heart to God. In turn, it gives place in the heart and mind of a child in some future day to remember the diligent labors of a parent and to draw on saving memories created by a converted parent. Such memories may be planted in children as they observe a father coming into his son’s room early in the morning before leaving for work to tuck in the covers and then silently pray for his son’s well-being that day,<sup>36</sup> a father repeatedly singing every night to his daughter “for I know Heavenly Father loves me,”<sup>37</sup> a mother agonizing over her daughter making poor choices on a mobile device and pleading for heavenly help, and the cry of parents beseeching the Father during family prayer for their own forgiveness for reacting out of anger to the disobedience of a child. At various stormy seasons of a child’s life when she is “racked with torment” of her sins, overwhelming opposition, or

mortal afflictions, her mind will catch hold on the memories of seeing an imperfect parent “prophesying” concerning “one Jesus Christ,” and she will cry within her heart: “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness” (Alma 36:17–18). And with that cry, she will experience the same soul-filling joy and, together with the parent, “sing the song of redeeming love” (Alma 5:26). In the repetition of this divine cycle of redemption, this daughter, while on her own pathway of rebirth, is preparing to do the same labor with her children.

Does this not answer the question, *Why parents?*<sup>†</sup> As parents imperfectly strive to emulate the divine pattern of heavenly parents teaching their children, echoing a celestial pattern, they join them in their work and glory to bring to pass the eternal life of their children. And in doing that work, parents are preparing for their eternal destiny as the children of heavenly parents. The example of Alma urging his sons to remember the deliverance of their fathers as well as the life examples mentioned above demonstrate how a parent’s diligent labor regarding their individual salvation plays a central role in the exaltation of the family. As President Nelson taught, “This life is the time to prepare for salvation and exaltation. In God’s eternal plan, salvation is an individual matter; exaltation is a family matter.”<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Throughout the Book of Mormon, the message of a Savior is often delivered in the context of parents teaching their children. Alma 36–42 provides a powerful example of the concept of generational influence as well as the doctrinal importance of parents teaching their children to believe in Christ. Using the doctrinal importance of this divine pattern as a lens to examine the obedience and motivation of Alma to teach his sons, this chapter demonstrates the significance of why parents are commanded to echo this divine pattern. Inherent

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†. See footnote on page 342.

in Alma's obedience and motivation to teach his sons to believe in Christ is not only the saving message of a Savior but also the *pattern* through which this message was delivered. Established premortally by heavenly parents and central to our earthly experience and exaltation, this celestial pattern is more than a culturally defined practice or an outcome of nature—it is by divine design for the exaltation and eternal life of all God's children (Moses 1:39).

Given its exalting purpose in the Father's plan, the adversary continues to attack faith and trust in the Savior by deceiving, discouraging, and distracting parents from this sacred duty. The adversary surely is pleased when "parents neglect to teach and train their children to have faith in Christ and be spiritually born again."<sup>39</sup> Speaking on the scriptural phrase "that our children may know" from 2 Nephi 25:26, Elder Holland provided the simple but poignant reminder "that this Church is always only one generation away from extinction. . . . All we would have to do, I assume, to destroy this work is stop teaching our children for one generation. . . . In one generation it would be 1820 all over again. . . . That could happen. It won't happen. It mustn't happen. . . . but it could if we ceased to accept the obligation upon us, always upon those who have known and believed the truth, to teach it, especially to their children."<sup>40</sup>

Alma's motivation to obey this celestial pattern can help parents combat the adversary's tools of discouragement and neglect by inspiring parents to be empowered by their own deliverance and ongoing conversion and spiritual rebirth. From this empowered perspective, parents are able to understand that their labors to believe in Christ have the capacity to create saving memories with the potential to persuade their own children to believe in Christ so that "[their] children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins" (2 Nephi 25:23–26).

Prophets and apostles continue to admonish parents in this sacred duty, reminding them of a divine pattern given to them so that they are not deceived by the adversary. As a counterstrategy to the adversary's attack on the family and faith, President Nelson

emphasized that the “scriptures make it clear that parents have the primary responsibility to teach the doctrine to their children” (see Doctrine and Covenants 93:40; Moses 6:58–62).<sup>41</sup> Similarly, President Henry B. Eyring addressed the pattern of parents teaching their children to believe in Christ, reminding parents that the “greater emphasis on gospel instruction in the home and within the family . . . has been the Lord’s way since families were created in this world.”<sup>42</sup>

To members of the Church, the First Presidency has declared, “We counsel parents and children to give highest priority to family prayer, family home evening, gospel study and instruction, and wholesome family activities. However worthy or appropriate other demands or activities may be, they must not be permitted to displace the *divinely appointed duties that only parents and family can adequately perform.*”<sup>43</sup>

As parents are reminded of the divine pattern to teach the spirit children of heavenly parents, the charge of Elder Neil L. Andersen rings true: “We hold in our arms the rising generation. They come to this earth with important responsibilities and great spiritual capacities. We cannot be casual in how we prepare them. Our challenge as parents and teachers is not to create a spiritual core in their souls but rather to *fan the flame of their spiritual core already aglow with the fire of their premortal faith.*”<sup>44</sup>

The hope is that this doctrinal review of Alma’s example of teaching his sons will inspire and motivate parents today to avoid deception and be diligent in echoing a celestial pattern to teach their children to believe in Christ.

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## Notes

1. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "In Praise of Those Who Save," *Ensign*, April 2016, 77.
2. See Dale G. Renlund, "Choose You This Day," *Ensign*, November 2018, 104.
3. See John W. Welch, "Longevity of Book of Mormon People and the 'Age of Man,'" *Journal of Collegium Aesculapium* 3 (1985): 35–45.
4. The phrase *earthly parents* is used here and throughout the chapter in connection with the hymn, "I Am a Child of God" and the phrase "has given me an *earthly* home, with *parents* kind and dear" (emphasis added). See Naomi W. Randall, "I Am a Child of God," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 301.
5. Uchtdorf, "In Praise of Those Who Save," 72; emphasis added.
6. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, May 2017, 145.
7. See Julie B. Beck, "You Have a Noble Birthright," *Ensign*, May 2006, 106. See also Doctrine and Covenants 138:56.
8. See Robert D. Hales, "The Plan of Salvation: A Sacred Knowledge to Guide Us," *Ensign*, October 2015, 24.
9. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 145.
10. See Boyd K. Packer, "Pattern of Our Parentage," *Ensign*, November 1984, 66.
11. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 145.
12. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 145.
13. D. Todd Christofferson, "Why Marriage, Why Family," *Ensign*, May 2015, 52.
14. Russell M. Nelson, "Opening Remarks," *Ensign*, November 2018, 7–8.
15. Russell M. Nelson, "Salvation and Exaltation," *Ensign*, May 2008, 8.
16. Dallin H. Oaks, "No Other Gods," *Ensign*, November 2013, 73. Robert D. Hales, "The Eternal Family," *Ensign*, November 1996, 64.
17. Henry B. Eyring, "The Family," *Ensign*, February 1998, 15.
18. Steve C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Book of Mormon: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 345.
19. Harper, *Making Sense of the Book of Mormon*, 347.
20. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 210; emphasis added.
21. See the title page of the Book of Mormon.

22. Throughout the remainder of the chapter I will refer to the elder Alma as Alma, and to his son as Alma.
23. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Alma, Son of Alma," *Ensign*, March 1977, 79–80; emphasis added.
24. Welch, "Longevity of Book of Mormon People," 35–45.
25. In his analysis of textual variants of the Book of Mormon original manuscript, Royal Skousen explains that earlier printed editions of the Book of Mormon used the word "retain" in the phrase, "return unto them, and acknowledge your faults and [retain] that wrong which ye have done" (Alma 39:13). This was later emended and the text now reads, "return unto them, and acknowledge your faults and that wrong ye have done" (Alma 39:13). Skousen then describes that during the transcription process an "accidental ink blob" had fallen on the *l* of "relain." Given the "stroke-like blob" it was thus printed as "retain." Using examples from Oliver Cowdery's handwriting in other parts of the transcription, Skousen makes the case that the letter *l* is likely a *p*. And, given Oliver's tendency to write *n* and *r* the same, the *n* is likely an *r*, recommending the word should be "repair." See Royal Skousen, "Analysis of the Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part Four Alma 21–55," in *The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2007), 4:2394–96.
26. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is interesting to consider the interdependent yet unique practices of *preparing* and *teaching*. The act of teaching addresses a correct understanding of doctrines and principles such a faith and repentance. The act of preparing integrates the application of these doctrines and principles as one experiences good and evil and drawing on one's agency.
27. See note 25. As part of Alma's effort to repent from his iniquities, he went about among the people he had misled to *repair* the damage he had done (Mosiah 27:35). This seems to be the same counsel of repentance he is giving his son to go and "[repair] that wrong which ye have done" (Alma 39:13).
28. See notes 25 and 27.
29. Holland, "Alma, Son of Alma," 80–81.
30. See Renlund, "Choose You This Day," 104.
31. Henry B. Eyring, "Gathering the Family of God," *Ensign*, May 2017, 20.

32. Jeffery R. Holland, "What Is the Heart of the Atonement?" CES Symposium, August 1980; emphasis added.
33. To emphasize the chiastic repetition and harmony, the two verses in the chiastic hierarchy will be given. John W. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 118.
34. See David A. Bednar, "Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan," *Ensign*, June 2006, 82.
35. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 167.
36. See Julian Dyke, "Thanks, Dad," *New Era*, April 1993, 38.
37. See "I Am Like a Star," *Children's Songbook*, 163.
38. Nelson, "Salvation and Exaltation," 10.
39. Christofferson, "Why Marriage, Why Family," 52.
40. Jeffrey R. Holland, "That Our Children May Know," Brigham Young University devotional, 25 August 1981, 4, speeches.byu.edu.
41. Nelson, "Opening Remarks," 8.
42. See Henry B. Eyring, "Women and Gospel Learning in the Home," *Ensign*, November 2018, 58.
43. Neil L. Anderson, "Tell Me the Stories of Jesus," *Ensign*, May 2010, 108; emphasis added.
44. "Letter from the First Presidency," *Liahona*, December 1999, 1; emphasis added.