

Alma's Loving Counsel to His Sons about the Law of Justice

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Like other good, spiritually minded fathers, Alma the Younger wanted the best for his sons—yet rather than focus on worldly achievement, he cared for their eternal success. With each of his three sons, Alma shared principles related to the law of justice and how God's justice would affect them both in their current life situations as well as in eternity. For example, Alma's impassioned plea at the end of speaking to Corianton captures the necessity of accepting the justice of God and letting it, along with God's mercy and long-suffering, humble us and change our hearts: "O my son, I desire that ye should deny the justice of God no more. Do not endeavor to excuse yourself in the least point because of your sins, by denying the justice of God; but do you let the justice of God, and his mercy, and his long-suffering have full sway in your heart; and let it bring you down to the dust in humility" (Alma 42:30). Alma understood that justice is immutable and cannot be rationalized away simply because mortals may view things differently. He

exhorted his sons, especially Corianton, to not ignore or dismiss justice or else they could face severe repercussions. Yet Alma's discussion was not only about the negative punishment of God's justice, but was also a reminder that because God is just, he is consistent and can bless his children when they are obedient to his laws.

I will look at various principles associated with the law of justice in Alma 36–42 by examining Alma's discussion with each son and then summarizing common principles shared among them. While other studies have examined the law of justice and its relationship to mercy, particularly in the discussion with Corianton, this study aims to make a contribution to understanding this doctrine by examining all the principles related to justice in Alma's discussion with his *three* sons.

Principles and Definitions Related to Justice

Before discussing Alma's actual teachings related to justice in Alma 36–42, perhaps it would be helpful to outline some principles and definitions related to justice as understood in the restored gospel and particularly in these chapters. In its most basic and eternal sense, justice is an unchanging principle or law that guarantees consequences for actions. It is the eternal notion that good is good and evil is evil, and when one makes choices on one side or the other, the requisite consequences follow. Even God the Father fully abides by the eternal law of justice and its demands inasmuch as two of his core attributes are being just and righteous. Because God displays these qualities, a common teaching throughout the Book of Mormon is that no unclean thing can enter his presence (e.g., Alma 40:26).

Given that justice is eternal, we should innately know what is just or right, but for various reasons God's children even in the premortal council and in the Garden of Eden have chosen to disobey and have thereby faced the effects of justice. All mortals sin, and if left solely to the demands of justice, none could return to God. This principle is found in Alma 42:14: "And thus we see that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice; yea, the justice of God, which

consigned them forever to be cut off from his presence.” However, God allows a way for mercy to satisfy the demands of justice by introducing a probationary period wherein consequences of justice are suspended and new obligations or conditions are placed on mortals in their relationship to God. These new demands or laws cannot alter the requirements of justice but are manifestations of, or in essence teachings of, the demands of justice tied into God’s plan of salvation and more specifically his covenant relationship with his children. They spell out not only what justice requires of them but more importantly the way to enter God’s presence through Jesus Christ and his payment for sin. God thus institutes laws or commandments whereby if mortals obey they receive blessings, but if they disobey they receive punishments. Jesus Christ’s atonement works within these laws to forgive, or “give,” the price “before” mortals have to fully pay the price alone for their sins, with the end result that justice’s demands (every sin makes one unclean and requires a penalty) are satisfied and mortals can be considered clean again to be worthy of God’s presence.

Sometimes the terms *judgment*, *God’s judgment*, or *God’s justice* are used to describe the implementation of God’s justice on an individual or group. In these cases the probationary period usually expires, and the demands of justice are exacted on the wicked. If, however, the new conditions of obtaining mercy such as faith in Jesus Christ and repentance are met, then God’s blessings through the atonement of Jesus Christ are experienced at judgment. Alma teaches in these chapters that “it is requisite with the justice of God that men should be judged according to their works” (Alma 41:3), “according to the law *and* justice” (Alma 42:23; emphasis added throughout). Thus one’s judgment is based on one’s choices vis-à-vis the law given them as well as on the eternal principle of justice.

To Helaman

In Alma’s farewell testament or counsel to each of his three sons (comprising Alma 36–42), Alma shared doctrines, including principles

associated with the law of justice, that he felt would bless their lives.¹ Alma first spoke to his son Helaman, emphasizing God's steadfastness in blessing the obedient, God's judgments against the wicked, and Alma's personal experience with God's possible judgment during his angelic conversion experience.

At the very beginning of Alma's counsel to Helaman, he reiterates a common promise and warning found throughout the Book of Mormon—sometimes referred to as the covenant of the promised land—that highlights God's justice over those he brings to this promised land. Alma first gives the positive affirmation of this covenant or promise: "Inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land" (Alma 36:1). Later, Alma gives both the promise and the warning: "Inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land; and ye ought to know also, that inasmuch as ye will not keep the commandments of God ye shall be cut off from his presence" (36:30). Alma repeats the promise and warning yet again after discussing the importance of the records he is entrusting to Helaman because they contain the commandments of God: "How strict are the commandments of God. And he [God] said: If ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land—but if ye keep not his commandments ye shall be cut off from his presence" (Alma 37:13). Although these phrases do not use the word *justice*, the concepts they present and the guaranteed consequences they yield derive from justice, this covenant being a microcosm of the eternal law of justice—that obedience brings blessings and happiness, and disobedience leads to punishment and misery. The earthly covenant is often tied to the land inasmuch as prosperity is the blessing for obedience and destruction, being swept off the face of the land, or, in this case, distance from the presence of the Lord, are punishments for disobedience. Thus, the covenant may be a type for the ultimate eternal reward of inheriting or forfeiting God's kingdom. It is worth noting that Alma emphasizes the positive aspect of this covenant to his righteous son but feels that Helaman should also know the consequence of disobedience.

In a related “if ye transgress the commandments . . . but if ye keep the commandments” statement specifically tailored to Helaman and his responsibility to care for the sacred records, Alma warns Helaman that *if* he transgresses the commandments of God, the sacred things will be taken away from him and he will be delivered up unto Satan (Alma 37:15–16). But *if* Helaman keeps the commandments of God and does what the Lord commands, “no power of earth or hell can take them from [him], for God is powerful to the fulfilling of all his words” (37:16). Not only is Alma teaching Helaman an important principle about obedience and disobedience in relation to God’s justice, but he also refers to God’s faithfulness in fulfilling all his words, an important trait of God’s justice. “For he will fulfil all his promises which he shall make unto you, for he has fulfilled his promises which he has made unto our fathers” (37:17).

The *Lectures on Faith* clarify the relationship of faith in God and the attribute of justice:

It is also necessary, in order to the exercise of faith in God, unto life and salvation, that men should have the idea of the existence of the attribute justice, in him. For without the idea of the existence of the attribute Justice, in the Deity, men could not have confidence sufficiently to place themselves under his guidance and direction; for they would be filled with fear and doubt, lest the Judge of all the earth would not do right; and thus fear, or doubt, existing in the mind, would preclude the possibility of the exercise of faith in him for life and salvation. But, when the idea of the existence of the attribute justice, in the Deity, is fairly planted in the mind, it leaves no room for doubt to get into the heart, and the mind is enabled to cast itself upon the Almighty without fear and without doubt, and with most unshaken confidence, believing that the Judge of all the earth will do right.²

Jeffrey R. Holland further explained that

however frightening it may be to contemplate a just God, it is infinitely more frightening to me to contemplate an unjust God. . . . We would not have the faith, due to fear, to live righteously or to love better or to repent more readily if somehow we didn't think that justice would count for us, if somehow we thought that God would change his mind and decide there was another set of rules. Because we know that God is just and would cease to be God if he weren't so, we have the faith, we have the makings and the beginnings and the foundation of faith, to go forward and to know that we will not be the victims of whimsy or caprice or a bad day or a bad joke.³

Belief in the justice of God engenders confidence that he will be consistent and will hold everyone to the same accountability and that we can wholeheartedly rely upon him. Rather than being a capricious God who could change his mind or plan on a whim, God manifests his consistency when he declares that he is *bound* when we do what he says (but we have no promise when we are disobedient because the conditions have already been set and cannot be changed; Doctrine and Covenants 82:10). Alma emphasizes this principle when he states that “whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions, and shall be lifted up at the last day” (Alma 36:3).⁴

Alma shares his conversion experience with Helaman to teach how close he had been to facing the full price of the judgment of God if he had not changed.⁵ Alma received a taste of God's powerful justice through the angelic visitor, whose voice of thunder caused the earth to tremble, and, says Alma, “we all fell to the earth, for the fear of the Lord came upon us” (Alma 36:7). For three days and three nights he was racked with torment and the pains of a damned soul, harrowed up by the memory of his many sins. Alma wished he “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” (36:15). In the midst of this suffering, Alma remembered

the teachings of his father about Jesus Christ and he cried within his heart: "O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death" (36:18). His pains were suddenly replaced by joy and marvelous light, and instead of shrinking from the presence of God, he envisioned God sitting upon his throne, and his soul longed to be there (36:22). Whereas Alma had at first received a bitter taste of the consequences of his disobedient actions, now he wanted Helaman to know what he had learned, that there was a way to escape that misery through Jesus Christ. The principle is quite simple: repentance leads us away from the negative effects of disobedience and puts us back to the side of God's justice where we can receive blessings and joy through mercy. For this reason—to receive the blessings of mercy and avoid the demands of justice—Alma says that "from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost" (36:24).

Even though Alma repented and avoided the destructive force of God's justice, he does share that others caught up in secret works and abominations were destroyed because they did not repent. They had been warned that unless they repented, God would destroy them from off the face of the earth, "and now, my son, we see that they did not repent; therefore they have been destroyed, and thus far the word of God has been fulfilled" (Alma 37:26). Prophets of the Lord had been sent to them to declare their iniquities, but "the blood of those whom they murdered did cry unto the Lord their God for vengeance upon those who were their murderers; and thus the judgments of God did come upon these workers of darkness and secret combinations" (37:30). Indeed, Alma teaches his son Helaman that both faithful blessings and sore punishments are aspects of God's just judgments as God fulfills his words and warnings.

To Shiblon

Alma's counsel to his son Shiblon is admittedly brief but contains some noteworthy aspects of teachings related to the law of justice. Just as he had taught Helaman, Alma reiterates the promise of the land to Shiblon: "Inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land; and inasmuch as ye will not keep the commandments of God ye shall be cut off from his presence" (Alma 38:1). Alma also emphasizes God's steadfastness and care for those who will put their trust in him in a quid pro quo relationship: "as much as ye shall put your trust in God even so much ye shall be delivered out of your trials, and your troubles, and your afflictions, and ye shall be lifted up at the last day" (38:5; compare 36:3, 27). God's positive consequences of justice require some action on our part, but then God magnifies that action with great blessings leading even to exaltation. Because of Shiblon's steadiness and faithfulness, Alma is able to focus more on positive blessings, such as being delivered out of one's trials and being exalted at the last day. In a much briefer fashion than with Helaman, Alma shares the incredible transformation that came upon him as part of his conversion experience, going from "the most bitter pain and anguish of soul" to a remission of sins (38:8). While certainly this highlights God's mercy, it comes as a result of crying out to the Lord Jesus Christ to avoid the full effects of the law of justice of which he was being given a foretaste when coming face-to-face with an angel who spoke with the voice of thunder.

To Corianton

Alma's counsel to his temporarily wayward son, Corianton, is filled with teachings about the law of justice in an effort to steer Corianton back on the right path before he experiences the full weight of God's justice. There is some irony in this exchange since Alma had once been the wayward son who was brought back to the covenant path because of the teachings of his father about Jesus Christ.⁶ Now it is

Alma's turn to be a father striving to help his struggling son return to Christ and repent. Thus, from his own past experiences, Alma warns Corianton that he cannot hide his crimes from God, and unless he repents, "they will stand as a testimony against you at the last day" (Alma 39:8). Similar to law courts that weigh the evidence and the testimonies of witnesses against a defendant, our sins will stand as a testimony against us in the final judgment unless they have been "forgiven" by God through our repentance and are remembered no more (Doctrine and Covenants 58:42).

Building on the theme of God's judgment, Alma teaches that the resurrection will occur so that we can be brought to stand before God to be judged according to our works (Alma 40:21). This final judgment seems to require the body since many of our decisions were made while in the body, and those actions are what lead us to be consigned to happiness or misery (40:17). But the restoration of the body for judgment is only part of the principle of restoration that Alma wants Corianton to understand. Another key concept Alma is teaching about restoration is the existence of opposing final outcomes produced by the law of justice: eternal happiness on the one hand, or endless misery on the other. "And now, my son, this is the restoration of which has been spoken by the mouths of the prophets—And then shall the righteous shine forth in the kingdom of God. But behold, an awful death cometh upon the wicked; for they die as to things pertaining to things of righteousness; for they are unclean, and no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of God; but they are cast out, and consigned to partake of the fruits of their labors or their works, which have been evil; and they drink the dregs of a bitter cup" (40:24–26). Christ has already drunk the dregs of a bitter cup, but if we fail to choose him and avail ourselves of the blessings of his atonement, then we will be left to suffer for our own sins or to suffer even as he suffered (Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–17).

Alma continues his discussion about restoration because he senses that Corianton's mind has been worried about something that some people in today's modern society also struggle with: Why

would God punish his children, consigning them to a state of misery? Why do evil actions matter when God could simply ignore them and look the other way? The short answer is that God cannot change the fact that sin or wrongdoing ultimately leads to misery without ignoring and going out of alignment with the eternal principle of justice, which would take away his status as God. Corianton, on the other hand, desires a plan with no justice, or automatic mercy that doesn't require any preconditions. As Alma will explain, however, the principle of restoration, based on God's "great and eternal purposes, which were prepared from the foundation of the world," prevents this from being possible because "in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds. If he has desired to do evil, and has not repented in his days, behold, evil shall be done unto him, according to the restoration [or justice] of God" (Alma 42:26–28). Due to the inexorable demands of the law of justice that state that a penalty must be paid for any sin, whatever we desire and do of a sinful nature will ultimately be reflected back onto us, evil for evil, unless we repent.

Alma had set the doctrinal framework and left little room for misunderstanding: "The plan of restoration is requisite with the justice of God; for it is requisite that all things should be restored to their proper order. . . . And it is requisite with the justice of God that men should be judged according to their works" (Alma 41:2–3). The repeated adjective *requisite* highlights the necessity of God's justice and judgment. The 1828 Noah Webster dictionary defines requisite as "required by the nature of things or by circumstances; necessary; so needful that it cannot be dispensed with." Being judged and restored to our proper order is necessary and needful with the justice of God, and Alma went on to explain what that proper order will be:

If their works were good in this life, and the desires of their hearts were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good. And if their works are evil they shall be restored unto them for evil. Therefore, all things shall be restored to their proper order, every thing to its

natural frame—mortality raised to immortality, corruption to incorruption—raised to endless happiness to inherit the kingdom of God, or to endless misery to inherit the kingdom of the devil, the one on one hand, the other on the other—the one raised to happiness according to his desires of happiness, or good according to his desires of good; and the other to evil according to his desires of evil; for as he has desired to do evil all the day long even so shall he have his reward of evil when the night cometh. And so it is on the other hand. If he hath repented of his sins, and desired righteousness until the end of his days, even so he shall be rewarded unto righteousness. These are they that are redeemed of the Lord; yea, these are they that are taken out, that are delivered from that endless night of darkness; and thus they stand or fall; for behold, they are their own judges, whether to do good or do evil. Now, *the decrees of God are unalterable*; therefore, the way is prepared that whosoever will may walk therein and be saved. (Alma 41:3–8)

Note some of the straightforward principles related to justice that Alma teaches in this passage. We can either end up with happiness in the kingdom of God or misery in the kingdom of the devil. What makes the difference? Good desires and actions, often manifested as desires for endless happiness, lead to good and happiness after this life, while evil leads to evil. Those who repent and desire righteousness will be rewarded unto righteousness through the redemption of the Lord. We become the judges of our own choices, whether choosing good or evil, deciding to stand or fall. Either way, for God to justly offer a way to salvation requires that the way is prepared, guaranteed, and unalterable beforehand; otherwise it is not just but dependent on the whim of a changeable deity.

While it can be challenging to understand a loving God who allows destructive punishment to come upon his children, Joseph

Smith taught that the attribute of judgment in deity is necessary so that we may exercise faith in him for life and salvation.

It is also of equal importance that men should have the idea of the existence of the attribute judgment, in God, in order that they may exercise faith in him for life and salvation; for without the idea of the existence of this attribute in the Deity, it would be impossible for men to exercise faith in him for life and salvation, seeing that it is through the exercise of this attribute that the faithful in Christ Jesus are delivered out of the hands of those who seek their destruction; for if God were not to come out in swift judgment against the workers of iniquity and the powers of darkness, his saints could not be saved; for it is by judgment that the Lord delivers his saints out of the hands of all their enemies, and those who reject the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. But no sooner is the idea of the existence of this attribute, planted in the minds of men, than it gives power to the mind for the exercise of faith and confidence in God, and they are enabled, by faith, to lay hold on the promises which are set before them, and wade through all the tribulations and afflictions to which they are subjected by reason of the persecution from those who know not God, and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: believing, that in due time the Lord will come out in swift judgment against their enemies, and they shall be cut off from before him, and that in his own due time he will bear them off conquerers and more than conquerers in all things.⁷

God's judgment against the wicked provides the righteous faith and confidence, allowing them to patiently endure their tribulations and await his deliverance. God does not destroy the wicked out of hatred or as some kind of revenge for their disobedience. Rather, he allows the law of justice to take effect after warnings that had been given in an effort to lead them back to his presence are rejected.

Alma, therefore, exhorts Corianton to not risk one more offense against God upon these points of doctrine and realize he cannot be restored from sin to happiness, for “the meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous; just for that which is just; merciful for that which is merciful” (Alma 41:13). Just as God will be merciful, deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually, so Corianton needs to do the same. If he does these things, Alma promises, “then shall ye receive your reward; yea, ye shall have mercy restored unto you again; ye shall have justice restored unto you again; ye shall have a righteous judgment restored unto you again; and ye shall have good rewarded unto you again. For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again, and be restored; therefore, the word restoration more fully condemneth the sinner, and justifieth him not at all” (41:14–15).

Alma also explains the importance of the probationary time using the example of the fall of Adam and Eve and the time granted unto them to repent and serve God. If justice immediately followed course, there would have been no salvation for Adam, Eve, or their posterity. If God had decided to allow unfettered mercy to take over, then Adam and Eve would not have suffered the just consequences of their choice and could have partaken of the tree of life, thereby living forever, but they would have lived forever in their sins and it would have gone against the word of God and destroyed justice. “For behold, if Adam had put forth his hand immediately, and partaken of the tree of life, he would have lived forever, according to the word of God, having no space for repentance; yea, and also the word of God would have been void, and the great plan of salvation would have been frustrated” (Alma 42:5). However, God took the opportunity to suspend the immediate demands of justice and introduce conditioned mercy by granting them a probationary period, a time afforded us as well, so that we can repent and receive the merciful blessings of Christ’s atonement; otherwise we are in the grasp of justice that consigns us forever to be cut off from God’s presence because no unclean thing

can enter his presence (see 42:14). The only way to activate the plan of mercy and appease the demands of justice is through repentance. “According to justice, the plan of redemption could not be brought about, only on conditions of repentance of men in this probationary state, yea, this preparatory state; for except it were for these conditions, mercy could not take effect except it should destroy the work of justice. Now the work of justice could not be destroyed; if so, God would cease to be God” (42:13). Justice is such an essential characteristic of God that without it God would cease to be God. But God is also merciful, so an atonement was made in order to bring about the plan of mercy and appease the demands of justice. “The plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” (42:15).

Alma continues his logical explanation of the necessity of repentance by highlighting the two opposing ends of the law of justice. On one side is eternal punishment, and on the opposite is the eternal plan of happiness (Alma 42:16). This dichotomy is brought about because just laws were given to mortals in God’s covenant relationship with them. Elder D. Todd Christofferson taught, “It is His perfect understanding and use of law—or, in other words, His justice—that gives God His power. We need the justice of God—a system of fixed and immutable laws that He Himself abides by and employs—so that we can have and exercise agency. This justice is the foundation of our freedom to act and is our only path to ultimate happiness.”⁸ Agency is possible because there are laws that provide choices since without a choice of right or wrong, agency is nonfunctional. Doctrine and Covenants 88:34 explains, “that which is governed by law is also preserved by law and perfected and sanctified by the same.” Laws provide opportunities for obedience, which then, according to God’s justice, bring blessings. But because of our misuse of agency and our failings to be governed by law, we will inevitably break God’s law and sin, thereby losing the preservation, perfection, and sanctification of

law. However, because a punishment is affixed to the just law, that punishment can serve as a wake-up call and lead us to remorse of conscience or, in other words, to repentance (Alma 42:18), which guides us back to the one being who can, through his atonement, put “us right with the law so that it is once again supporting and preserving us, not condemning us.”⁹ Thus, conscience and law are basic to understanding and implementing the law of justice and mercy. “And if there was no law given, if men sinned what could justice do, or mercy either, for they would have no claim upon the creature? But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth; otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God” (42:21–22). Once again Alma underscores the fundamental truth that without justice, God would cease to be God.

Later, for the third time, Alma teaches through these fictional scenarios that if mercy could rob justice, God would cease to be God (Alma 42:25). Why is justice such a fundamental attribute of God? Because with it, God can bring about his great and eternal purposes that were prepared from the foundation of the world. He will not compel others to come unto him, but he sets up the choice and guarantees the consequence so that each individual will receive what they choose. They will be restored according to their deeds: either to salvation and redemption or destruction and misery. All will be judged according to their works based on the law *and* justice. In the final judgment as resurrected beings in the presence of God, “justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own; and thus, none but the truly penitent are saved” (42:24).

Alma concludes his words to Corianton with an invitation to not let these doctrinal matters trouble him anymore, but to only let his sins trouble him and lead him to repentance. He pleads, “O my son, I desire that ye should deny the justice of God no more. Do not endeavor to excuse yourself in the least point because of your sins, by denying the justice of God; but do you let the justice of God, and his

mercy, and his long-suffering have full sway in your heart; and let it bring you down to the dust in humility” (Alma 42:30). To Corianton’s credit, he followed his father’s counsel and resolved his sins so that he could continue to preach the word of God to the people, leading them to repentance, baptism, and continual peace (Alma 49:30).

Conclusion

Because Alma was going to depart from his family and people, and because the people were caught up in great wickedness, Alma took the opportunity to give final counsel to his three sons about righteousness and the consequences, both positive and negative, of justice (Alma 35:15–16). These teachings would prove important not only in his sons’ individual lives but also in their roles as missionaries and church leaders teaching others these same principles. Through a close reading of Alma’s teachings to his sons, we can perceive the fundamental importance of justice to the plan of salvation. Justice maintains and guarantees the steadfast conditions necessary for God’s children to know the God with whom they are covenanting and the essential requirements of their earthly experience. For true and abiding faith that leads to eternal life and salvation, one must know that God has attributes of justice and judgment.¹⁰ Alma loved his sons to the point of stressing these truths to them whatever their current spiritual state, whether righteous and steady, or wayward and struggling. His teachings across these different situations demonstrate the power of justice—that it is applicable to all. It also teaches us that righteous individuals use their knowledge of the law of justice to align themselves with it and receive its blessings while also encouraging others to keep the commandments because they know obedience is the path to eternal blessings. In the final judgment, justice is not affected by how or when one became clean—it requires only that one is clean. If we are clean, then we can reenter God’s presence.

For Helaman and Shiblon, Alma emphasizes the specific covenant of the land as a microcosm to the broader, more eternal law of

justice. As long as they maintained their faithfulness to this covenant, they would prosper and receive God's great blessings. However, he also warns them what would happen if they abandoned these commandments. To all his sons Alma teaches the steadfast nature of God and his justice, which has created an unalterable path back to his presence. There is an element of *quid pro quo* in the covenant relationship with God—if we do what is required, God will be faithful in fulfilling his word, which brings blessings and growth far beyond what we could achieve on our own. There is also impartiality in God's justice and mercy so that he is not a respecter of persons but is fair to all; otherwise he would cease to be God. "God cannot act any way He pleases to save a person. He must do it in a way that upholds and conforms to immutable law, and thanks be to God that He has done so by providing a Savior."¹¹ We cannot hide our sins from God, but he can cover them up (the Hebrew sense of "expiation," *kpr*) and forget them when we avail ourselves of the merciful blessings of Christ's atonement.

Yet Alma himself struggled in his youth and rejected a covenant relationship with God, so he shares his conversion experience with his sons as a model of how to avoid the harsh punishments of the law of justice and enjoy the eternal blessings. Alma sensed the spiritual anguish and separation from God's presence that come as just consequences of sin, but he also learned, and now is teaching his sons, that faith in Christ and his atonement allows the negative penalties of justice to be replaced by the assured blessings of repentance, thereby availing themselves of the positive benefits and guarantees of justice. Justice ensures that righteous actions produce joy. Good will be restored to good.

There is some irony in that Alma was once a wayward son and yet now desires to help his wayward son, Corianton, find his way back to Christ through repentance, just as he had done. Alma encourages Corianton to use his agency wisely during his time of probation, when the negative effects of behavior are not experienced fully or immediately since justice does not have full sway; but he warns

him that there will come a time when that state of probation ends and justice's demands must be met. Obedience, then, is an aspect of the tempered justice and mercy experienced within the probationary state. The probationary state itself is experienced because God chose to honor justice over unqualified mercy, and it is by justice and its guarantees that one receives exaltation. Alma had needed a righteous father's prayers and efforts, and those resulted in God sending an angel to help him leave his destructive path. In the end, though, Corianton and his brothers did not need an angelic visitor, simply their father's testimony and experience.

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Notes

1. Mormon stated Alma's purpose in his editorial introduction to this section after describing the wicked condition of his people: "Therefore, he [Alma] 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. And we have an account of his commandments, which he gave unto them according to his own record" (Alma 35:16). Interestingly, what constitutes "righteousness" is not defined further in Alma's teachings beyond simply obedience to the vague category of "commandments," but Alma does use this exact phrase, "things pertaining unto righteousness," later when describing the wicked who "die as to things *pertaining to things of righteousness*; for they are unclean, and no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of God" (Alma 40:26).
2. "Doctrine and Covenants, 1835," pp. 47–48, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/56>.

3. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Borne upon Eagles' Wings," in *Brigham Young University 1974 Speeches*, 3–4, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland_borne-upon-eagles-wings/.
4. Alma also states that the promise of the land is according to God's word, implying that God will fulfill his promises (Alma 36:30).
5. Earlier, Ammon reflected upon this experience from his perspective of how close they (Alma and the sons of Mosiah) were to receiving an awful destruction: "Who could have supposed that our God would have been so merciful as to have snatched us from our awful, sinful, and polluted state? Behold, we went forth even in wrath, with mighty threatenings to destroy his church. Oh, then, why did he not consign us to an awful destruction, yea, why did he not let the sword of his justice fall upon us, and doom us to eternal despair? Oh, my soul, almost as it were, fleeth at the thought. Behold, he did not exercise his justice upon us, but in his great mercy hath brought us over that everlasting gulf of death and misery, even to the salvation of our souls" (Alma 26:17–20).
6. Jeffrey R. Holland underscored Alma's importance in the Book of Mormon record. "Perhaps no son, however, captures our imagination like the younger Alma. More pages are devoted to the span of his life and ministry than to any other person in the Book of Mormon, and the book that bears his name is nearly 2 1/2 times longer than any other in the record. He strides with prophetic power onto the great center stage of the Book of Mormon, appearing near the precise chronological midpoint of the record—500 years after Lehi leaves Jerusalem, 500 years before Moroni seals up the record.

The centrality of Alma's life is not limited simply to chronology or pagination, however. 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. Such dramatic redemption and movement away from wickedness and toward the permanent joy of exaltation may not be outlined with more compelling force anywhere else. In him is symbolized the task of the whole human family, which must, as Paul commands, 'leave your former way of life, . . . lay aside that old human nature which, deluded by its lusts, is sinking towards

death. You must be made new in mind and spirit, and put on the new nature. . . .’ (Eph. 4:22–24, New English Bible.)” From Jeffrey R. Holland, “Alma, Son of Alma,” *Ensign*, March 1977.

7. “Doctrine and Covenants, 1835,” p. 48, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/56>.
8. D. Todd Christofferson, “A Message at Christmas,” in *Brigham Young University 2017–2018 Speeches*, 4, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/d-todd-christofferson_a-message-at-christmas/.
9. Christofferson, “Message at Christmas,” 4.
10. Note the presence of these two attributes together in Captain Moroni’s explanation for why the Lord allows the righteous to be slain. “For the Lord suffereth the righteous to be slain that his *justice and judgment* may come upon the wicked; therefore ye need not suppose that the righteous are lost because they are slain; but behold, they do enter into the rest of the Lord their God” (Alma 60:13). Like in Alma’s teachings, Moroni is also concerned that the judgments of God will come upon his people because of their slothfulness or, in other words, their failing during their time of probation (60:14).
11. Christofferson, “Message at Christmas,” 4.