

Born of God—Partaking of the Fruit

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The phrase “born of God” in Alma 36–42 is not unique in the Book of Mormon, but Alma deepens its meaning by connecting it with Lehi’s imagery of partaking of the fruit of the tree of life. By reading Alma’s use of the expression “born of God” intratextually with Lehi’s description of the joy that comes from partaking of the fruit of the tree, we can better understand the doctrinal concepts to which these metaphors point. Recognizing these connections gives insight not only into the way that Lehi’s and Nephi’s posterity continued to use their writing, but also helps us better understand both Alma’s and Lehi’s experiences.

We will see that Alma’s expression “born of God” is equated with being at the tree and partaking of the fruit. Both of those metaphors, being born of God and tasting the fruit of the tree, point to the experience of spiritual life in Jesus Christ through faith, repentance, and covenant. The gift of the Holy Ghost allows us to experience

the joy of the presence of God now while also preparing us to be in the presence of God eternally if we continue to metaphorically stay at the tree and partake of the fruit. These chapters help us understand more fully that both the present presence of God, being filled with the Holy Ghost, and the future presence of God in eternal life are results of tasting the joy of redemption through Christ and being born of God. The kind of life that Alma describes as “born of God” is life filled with the influence and experiential knowledge of Christ through the Holy Ghost.

Tasting Exceeding Joy: Alma to Helaman in Chapter 36

In Alma 36 we see how Alma interweaves Lehi’s description of partaking of the fruit with his own term, being born of God, to explain the experience of finding spiritual life through Christ. He first introduces the language of the joy of partaking of the fruit and then later uses the metaphor of being born again to describe the same experience. Alma then brings both of these metaphors together and equates them with being filled with the Holy Ghost.

In this chapter Alma gives Helaman a detailed account of his experience of exercising faith in Christ unto repentance—he explains how he experienced forgiveness of his sins and “remember[ed] [his] pains no more” (Alma 36:19). Alma then uses the language of Lehi to describe this experience of forgiveness: “Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be *nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy*” (Alma 36:21; emphasis added throughout). In 1 Nephi 8:11–12 Lehi taught that partaking of the fruit of the tree was the “most sweet” and “filled [his] soul with exceedingly great joy.”

The textual connection to Lehi becomes even more explicit when Alma states that the joy of forgiveness through faith in Christ was a feeling like that of seeing God “even as our father Lehi saw” and says

that “and my soul did long to be there” (Alma 36:22). When Alma awakes, he describes the joy of forgiveness and seeing God. He says, “But behold, my limbs did receive their strength again, and I stood upon my feet, and did manifest unto the people that *I had been born of God*” (36:23). Here Alma is using the metaphor of being born of God that points to the new life found through his faith and repentance.

The expression “born of God” can be a phrase that we are not always comfortable saying as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. By studying Alma’s teachings in these chapters, as well as seeing this experience elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, we can gain greater insight into what is meant by being born of God. The key concept is that when we feel the Holy Ghost we feel spiritually alive. We have been born to a new kind of life that is filled with the Spirit, and therefore we want that which God wants.

The same changed desire that we see in Alma’s personal account is seen in the people of King Benjamin, who declared: “Because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). The influence of the Holy Ghost on human desires can also be seen in the people of Ammon who declared “that their hearts had been changed; that they had no more desire to do evil” (Alma 19:33). These born-of-God feelings of a new spiritual life through the presence of the Holy Ghost are real and very powerful. These feelings of forgiveness and wanting what God wants can be powerful and bring great joy, but they can also quickly fade if we do not actively repent and keep our covenants and instead move back into ordinary life.

As Alma explains his born-of-God experience to his son Helaman, he uses the metaphors of being born of God and partaking of the fruit of the tree as ways to express the experience of a new spiritual life in Christ. Here we can see how these metaphors are parallel ways of describing the same spiritual experience. Alma draws upon the language of “tasting joy” from Lehi’s vision of the tree to describe his desire to help others taste the fruit that he had tasted, that is, to

have the experience of redemption through Christ that he has had. Alma says that the experience of being born of God is something that he labors “without ceasing” to share and explains that it is the result of repentance (Alma 36:24).

In this critical passage, Alma connects all these expressions—tasting joy, being born of God, and being filled with the Holy Ghost—as parallels to explain the fruit of repentance: “Yea, and 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*” (Alma 36:24). With these crucial parallels, Alma helps us understand that the metaphors of tasting the fruit of the tree and being born of God are ways to express a new kind of life through Jesus Christ. This joyful life, this born-of-God life, is the experience that we have when we are filled with the Holy Ghost through our faith and repentance.

Alma’s language of tasting exceeding joy consciously parallels Lehi’s expression of the “exceedingly great joy” he felt upon partaking of the fruit of the tree (1 Nephi 8:12). Although Lehi doesn’t use the phrase “born of God” to describe his experience, reading his account in light of Alma’s commentary helps us understand the expression of being born of God more clearly. Lehi reports, “And it came to pass that I beheld a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy. And it came to pass that I did go forth and partake of the fruit thereof; and I beheld that it was most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted. Yea, and I beheld that the fruit thereof was white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen. And as I partook of the fruit thereof *it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy*; wherefore, I began to be desirous that my family should partake of it also; for I knew that it was desirable above all other fruit” (1 Nephi 8:10–12). The connection between partaking of the fruit and the experience of joy is reinforced in 1 Nephi 11:23 where the angel agrees with Nephi that it is the most desirable, “the *most joyous* to the soul” (1 Nephi 11:23). Lehi and Nephi are not using the words, but they are describing the

experience of being born of God, being born to a new spiritual life in Jesus Christ.

Alma's connection between partaking of the fruit and being filled with the Holy Ghost is less explicit in Lehi's language but can be understood from Nephi's conversation with the angel as well. Upon being asked if he knows the meaning of the tree, Nephi responds, "Yea, it is the *love of God*, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things" (1 Nephi 11:22). As the embodiment of the love of God, the tree represents Jesus Christ who embodied the love of God in his mortal ministry and atoning sacrifice. The angel clearly identifies the tree with Jesus Christ throughout 1 Nephi 11.

The fruit of the tree is therefore the benefits that we receive because of Christ's perfect life and atoning sacrifice. The joy that both Lehi and Nephi describe is the joy that Alma helps us identify when he connects the metaphor of tasting the fruit of the tree to the experience of being filled with the Holy Ghost. Alma, like Lehi, wants others "*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*" (Alma 36:24). Repentance and the gift of the Holy Ghost are fruits of the atonement of Christ. Through partaking of this fruit by coming unto Christ and exercising faith unto repentance, we are able to taste the joy of forgiveness and being clean. This is an immediate or, I would say, *present tense* sense of being born of God.

Being born of God in the present sense is being alive to this kind of godly life as we feel our hearts change through our repentance and experiencing forgiveness of our sins. As we are filled with the Holy Ghost we have joy, righteous desires, and are alive to the things of God. President Russell M. Nelson explained that "when we choose Heavenly Father to be our God and when we can feel the Savior's Atonement working in our lives, we will be filled with joy."¹ This is the joy of partaking of the fruit of the tree that Lehi, Nephi, and Alma testified of.

In addition to this present born-of-God experience, we have the opportunity to retain this born-of-God state more permanently as, over time, our natures are changed to take on this godly nature more completely. As we act upon the promptings of the Holy Ghost and continue to repent, denying ourselves all ungodliness, we are sanctified and continue to stay in the presence of God. Developing this future born-of-God nature will be more than just having a temporary inclination to do good things but having the Spirit of the Lord work on us so consistently that our entire natures are changed and we have become the sons and daughters of God in a sanctified, celestial fullness.

Jacob's insights in 2 Nephi 9 make it possible to appreciate the new born-of-God life that comes through being filled with the Holy Ghost. Jacob's language and insights likely inform Alma's articulation of the new kind of life that is possible with the Holy Ghost. Here Lehi's son Jacob teaches the core truth that Alma has experienced for himself: "O, my beloved brethren, remember the awfulness in transgressing against that Holy God, and also the awfulness of yielding to the enticings of that cunning one. Remember, to be *carnally-minded is death*, and to be *spiritually-minded is life eternal*" (2 Nephi 9:39). Jacob's connection between being spiritually minded and having life eternal helps us more deeply understand Alma's phrase "born of God" and how it connects with both tasting of the fruit of the tree of life and also being in the presence of God. When we are filled with the Holy Ghost, we are experiencing the presence of God in mortality. We are literally in the presence of God when we are full of the Holy Ghost because the Spirit is a member of the Godhead. We are also partaking of the fruit of the tree of life because having the gift of the Holy Ghost is one of the fruits of the atonement of Christ. It is not eternal life in its fullest sense, but it is life eternal.

When we are filled with the Holy Ghost, we are experiencing not a future born-again *nature*, partaking of eternal life and the presence of God, but a very real present *experience* of both of those things. We are feeling and thinking the way God does when we are filled with his

Spirit and that *quality* of life is what Jacob described as life eternal. The immediate effect of this present born-of-God experience flows from the influence of the Holy Ghost in our hearts and minds so that we want what God wants. In the Guide to the Scriptures at ChurchofJesusChrist.org, this is exactly the definition of being “born of God” or “born again”: “To have the Spirit of the Lord cause a mighty change in a person’s heart so that he has no more desire to do evil, but rather desires to seek the things of God.”²

Whether those feelings of joy and unity with God’s will and purposes continue to persist in our lives depends on whether or not we stay at the tree and continue to partake by living a holy life. Only by continuing to be filled with the Holy Ghost can we stay in the Lord’s presence and experience the joy that brings. As the Psalmist observed, “in [God’s] presence is fulness of joy” (Psalm 16:11). Helaman the prophet uses the same image speaking to Captain Moroni: “And now, my beloved brother, Moroni, may the Lord our God, who has redeemed us and made us free, keep you continually in his presence” (Alma 58:41). We see the connection between the presence of the Lord and being filled with the Holy Ghost in Psalm 51:11: “Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.”

It is important to note that Alma’s experience of tasting joy is not the joy of being free from problems or the joy of ignoring challenges, pains, grief, and loss. It is better understood as what Eve referred to as the “joy of our redemption” (Moses 5:11). It is the joy that causes us to sing the song of redeeming love (Alma 5:9). We feel that love and mercy by genuine repentance, experiencing Christ’s help for forgiveness and change. As Alma taught, “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*” (Alma 36:24). Experiencing the love and mercy of God reconciles us with God—filling us with his Spirit, bringing us into his presence, and granting us joy (see also, for example, Mosiah 4:1).

Building on his connection between being filled with the Holy Ghost, tasting the fruit, and being born of God, Alma explains to Helaman that this spiritual experience of being born of God is the source of experiential *knowledge*: “And I would not that ye think that I *know* of myself—not of the temporal but of the spiritual, not of the carnal mind but of God. Now, behold, I say unto you, *if I had not been born of God I should not have known these things*; but God has, by the mouth of his holy angel, made these things known unto me, not of any worthiness of myself” (Alma 36:4–5). This knowledge comes from the experience of being filled with the Holy Ghost and having that encounter change us.

In Alma’s words, again, “Yea, and 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*” (Alma 36:24). When we are filled with the Holy Ghost we are in a state that can be understood as the presence of God; we know him because we are experiencing his influence in our lives. When we are filled with the Holy Ghost we are living in a manner that can be described as being born of God; we *know* a dimension of life that is only possible through the enlivening influence of the Spirit.

At the end of chapter 36, Alma restates his experience and again uses Lehi’s term “taste” as well as “born of God” to indicate how the experience of forgiveness and being filled with the Holy Ghost is a source of knowledge for all who come and partake. “For because of the word which he has imparted unto me, behold, many have been *born of God, and have tasted as I have tasted, and have seen eye to eye as I have seen*; therefore they do know of these things of which I have spoken, as I do *know*; and the *knowledge* which I have is of God” (Alma 36:26).

The experience of being filled with the Holy Ghost is a way of knowing, not with sense knowledge, but spiritual knowledge. We *know* that Christ is our Savior when we experience the joy of his forgiveness and healing. As the man born blind declared, “One thing I

know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25); experiencing the healing and life-giving influence of the atonement through the reception of the Holy Ghost gives us experiential *knowledge* of the things of God.

At the very end of chapter 36, Alma also brings in the phrase “presence of God” as another way to articulate the born-of-God experience of being filled with the Holy Ghost and to further explain what can lead to separation from that joy. He warns Helaman that “not keep[ing] the commandments” leads to being “cut off from his presence” (Alma 36:30). Alma’s understanding of disobedience and the loss of the influence of the Holy Ghost as being cut off from the presence of God reinforces that being filled with the Holy Ghost is the experience of being in the presence of God.

Because the English of the Book of Mormon does not give us access to the original terms behind “cast off” and “cut off” in the Book of Mormon, it is hard to make a conclusive statement about why Alma uses the expression “cut off” in connection with being in a state of disobedience rather than the phrase “cast off” that we see Lehi using to describe his fear regarding Laman and Lemuel. Book of Mormon usage suggests, however, that being “cut off” represents a temporary condition that can change.³ One’s disobedience may ebb and flow and thus temporarily cut one off from the presence of the Lord in mortality, while being “cast off” may reflect the threat of this separation from God’s presence becoming a permanent, final state (see 1 Nephi 8:36 and Helaman 12:25). This matches the biblical use where being cast off forever is a haunting fear. Nephi also tells his brothers that he “fear[s] lest ye should be cast off forever” (1 Nephi 17:47). This expression of “fearing they should be cast off forever” is also used to describe an aspect of the repentance process that Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah went through before they were born of God and tasted the joyous fruit of being in his presence (see Mosiah 28:4 and 27:25–26). While Alma warns very directly about the result of disobedience in Alma 36–42, it is important to note that he never uses the more permanent expression “cast off” in reference to

any of his sons, but only the more transitory “cut off” from the presence of the Lord.

How to Keep the Knowledge of God: Alma to Shiblon in Chapter 38

In Alma’s teachings to Shiblon in chapter 38, we see a reiteration of the concept of being born of God and the knowledge of God that comes from this new kind of life filled with the Holy Ghost, living in the presence of the Lord. Alma’s focus here is encouraging Shiblon to continue on the spiritual path that he has begun, and again he uses language that evokes cultivating the tree. In Alma’s teachings to Shiblon we learn more about how the initial experience of partaking of the fruit of the tree can move from a present sense of being born of God to a deeper, and eventually eternal, life in Christ.

Alma tells Shiblon that by receiving a remission of his sins, he was born of God and gained the knowledge of Christ as his personal Redeemer that he is now sharing. Alma knows that Shiblon has had his own experience of being born again and knowing God and so Alma’s focus here is on the things that will help his son retain that knowledge and stay filled with the Holy Ghost. Alma wants Shiblon not just to have had the present experience of being born of God through initial forgiveness and redemption but wants to teach him how to stay at the tree and continue to experience the sanctifying influence of the Holy Ghost to prepare for the future sense of being born of God and becoming like him.

Whereas in chapter 36 the phrase “presence of God” shows up only at the very end, in chapter 38 Alma stresses the warning about being cut off from the presence of God right from the beginning: “My son, give ear to my words, for I say unto you, even as I said unto Helaman, that 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).

In addition to Alma's focus on the need to stay obedient to remain in the presence of God, in his teaching to Shiblon we again see the experience of being born of God as a way of knowing. "Now, my son, I would not that ye should think that I *know* these things of myself, but it is the *Spirit of God which is in me* which maketh these things known unto me; for *if I had not been born of God I should not have known these things*" (Alma 38:6). In Alma 38, Alma focuses on the spiritual knowledge that comes from having experienced redemption through Christ. Speaking to Shiblon, Alma describes the source of his knowledge of God's power of deliverance as his having been born of God and having the Spirit of God in him. This knowledge of being born of God is a parallel to the experience of deliverance from pains and sin that Alma spoke of in chapter 36. Experiencing forgiveness is experiencing the deliverance of Christ; this born-of-God experience brings with it a knowledge that can come in no other way.

Alma emphasizes that only by exercising faith unto repentance was he able to experience the Lord's forgiveness and the peace that it brings: "And it came to pass that I was three days and three nights in the most bitter pain and anguish of soul; and never, until I did cry out unto the Lord Jesus Christ for mercy, did I receive a remission of my sins. But behold, I did cry unto him and I did find peace to my soul" (Alma 38:8). While he does not label this as an experience of being born of God in this exact verse, Alma has used the phrase just two verses earlier. There he explained that his experience of being born of God is what allows him to know "these things" (38:6): "that 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). Alma's born-again experience of receiving a remission of his sins is how he knows of God's power to deliver, which he is teaching Shiblon about.

Alma's focus in Alma 38 is on how Shiblon can *keep* this experiential knowledge of being born again and being filled with the Holy Ghost. Alma focuses on the need for Shiblon to continue to metaphorically stay at the tree (or cultivate the seed that will grow into the

tree to use the language of Alma 32–33): “And now, my son, I trust that I shall have great joy in you, because of your steadiness and your faithfulness unto God; for as you have commenced in your youth to look to the Lord your God, even so I hope that you will continue in keeping his commandments; for blessed is he that endureth to the end. I say unto you, my son, that I have had great joy in thee already, because of thy *faithfulness* and thy *diligence*, and thy *patience* and thy *long-suffering* among the people of the Zoramites” (Alma 38:2–3). Shiblon has started looking to God but needs to continue. He needs to endure to the end.

It is not a coincidence that these qualities of faith, diligence, patience, and long-suffering are the *exact* terms that Alma uses in Alma 33 to describe what is needed so that the initial experience of partaking of the fruit (present tense born again) becomes the experience of having the tree itself grow up within us as we become sanctified by the continued presence of the Holy Ghost in our lives (future tense born again). The challenge of enduring to the end—the life-long journey from the initial born-again moment of deliverance and tasting the fruit of the tree to staying faithful and continuing to take on the divine nature as the tree grows up within us—is a universal challenge.

The long-term process of *becoming* purified and sanctified as we cultivate the influence of the atonement through the presence of the Holy Ghost is just like the present experience of partaking of the fruit and feeling the joy of forgiveness. That is to say, in both the long-term becoming and the short-term tasting we feel alive and feel joy. But the process of becoming lasts longer than the experience of tasting and thereby is not just a memory of a past encounter with God, but a new reality. We are not just remembering the presence of God, we are living in it.

By emphasizing these specific personal qualities of Shiblon, Alma points to his own earlier teachings about the way that Shiblon can, metaphorically, stay at the tree and stay in the presence of God, being filled with his Spirit. “And because of your *diligence* and your *faith* and

your *patience* with the word in nourishing it, that it may take root in you, behold, by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure; and ye shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst. Then, my brethren, ye shall reap the rewards of your *faith, and your diligence, and patience, and long-suffering*, waiting for the tree to bring forth fruit unto you” (Alma 32:42–43). When we are actively cultivating the influence of the Holy Ghost, the tree is growing up within us through our faith, diligence, patience, and long-suffering. As a result of this perseverance, our partaking of the fruit will not be a one-time experience but will become our eternal reality as the sanctifying influence of Holy Ghost changes our nature.

Shiblon is clearly a son that has been born of God, has partaken of the fruit, and is continuing to stay at the tree. Alma’s concern as a loving father is simply that Shiblon persist in being filled with the Holy Ghost, avoiding things that offend the Spirit and keeping the right attitude toward others so as to not lose the Spirit: “See that ye are not lifted up unto pride; yea, see that ye do not boast in your own wisdom, nor of your much strength. Use boldness, but not overbearance; and also see that ye bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love; see that ye refrain from idleness” (Alma 38:11–12).

Shiblon shows us an example of someone who has come to know the joy of repentance and is persisting in partaking of the fruit of the Holy Ghost but is also at risk and must be careful not to be careless, casual, boastful, prideful, or any of the other little sins that can remove the fullness of the Holy Ghost from our lives, thereby removing us from the presence of God. This chapter helps illustrate how the present experience of being born of God and being filled with the Holy Ghost can be fragile and how it takes faith, diligence, patience, and long-suffering in continuing a life of repentance and inviting the Holy Ghost to experience the full, future sense of being born of God where our natures are completely changed and sanctified and we are fully alive in Christ as his sons and daughters.

Choosing Life or Death: Alma to Corianton in Chapter 42

The opposite of being born is dying, and the opposite of being in the presence of God is being cut off from his presence. In Alma's comments to Corianton we get insights into what happens when we are *not* filled with the Holy Ghost but are instead cut off from his presence and are dying spiritually. In chapters 39–42 Alma never uses the terms “born of God” or “tasting.” He does, however, spend time discussing being “cut off from the presence of God.” Significantly, Alma expands on how being cut off from the presence of God is spiritual death and how spiritual death results in people becoming “carnal, sensual, and devilish, by nature” (Alma 42:10). Again, Alma may be echoing here Jacob's language that “to be carnally-minded is death, and to be spiritually-minded is life eternal” (2 Nephi 9:39).

The process of *becoming* godly and experiencing life eternal is the opposite of the spiritual death that Alma described to Corianton. This spiritual death occurs when we are cut off from the presence of God, “*becom[ing] carnal, sensual, and devilish, by nature*” (Alma 42:10). Either way we are *becoming* more spiritually alive or more spiritually dead as we make decisions in regard to being in the presence of God—being filled with the Holy Ghost or refusing to come and partake of the fruit of the tree.

We know that some people have a born-of-God experience and then later fall away and begin to die spiritually. President James E. Faust hints at some of the present-future tension in the term “born of God” in his comments on the subject: “When we are baptized, we are spiritually born of God and are *entitled* to receive His image in our countenances. We *should* experience a mighty change of heart so that we can ‘become new creatures’ and exercise faith in the redemption of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in order to maintain our standards of worthiness.”⁴ Note the tension in the phrases “entitled to receive” and “should experience.” The goal of being baptized and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost is to be born again, but the choice to receive

does not always happen in a sustained, consistent sense whereby we are “progressively becoming purified and sanctified.”⁵ It is also very important to note that President Ezra Taft Benson has taught that being spiritually born again is something beyond the ordinances themselves: “*Besides* the physical ordinance of baptism and the laying on of hands, one must be spiritually born again to gain exaltation and eternal life.”⁶

Elder David A. Bednar’s analogy of the pickle illustrates the difference between initial cleansing, producing a clean cucumber, and the longer-term saturation in the Spirit needed to become transformed.⁷ “Time on task” is needed for the real, present born-of-God experience of feeling forgiveness and being filled with the Holy Ghost to gradually develop into a new condition of being. Having a present born-of-God *experience* will not be sufficient to produce the deep change of *nature* in the future sense of being born of God.

Remaining in the presence of God through being filled with the Holy Ghost and choosing to continue to partake and to remain at the tree (letting it grow up in us) allow us to become more and more alive spiritually until we reach the future state of being born again to eternal life. Alma’s teaching to Corianton warns that the opposite, spiritual death, is also possible. Alma’s teaching to Corianton in chapter 42 emphasizes the opposite of being born of God, the danger of disobedience to the commandments, being “cut off from the presence of the Lord,” and dying spiritually.

Alma ends his teachings and admonitions to Corianton in chapters 39–42 by introducing the concept of being cut off from the presence of God; he does so in a way that connects it to partaking of the tree of life. Alma’s teachings to Corianton do not, however, focus on the fruit that brings joy and life but the one that brings death. In chapter 42, Alma uses the story of Adam and Eve being cut off from the tree of life in the Garden of Eden as a way to emphasize the spiritual death that comes through disobedience, something that Corianton has learned from his own experience: “But behold, it was appointed unto man to die—therefore, as they were cut off from the

tree of life they should be cut off from the face of the earth—and man became lost forever, yea, they became fallen man” (Alma 42:6). Alma emphasizes that through their choice to partake “our first parents were *cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord*; and thus we see they became subjects to follow after their own will” (42:7). Alma explains being cut off as a change in relationship to the Lord, cut off from his presence, but also as a change in nature and disposition for all: “Therefore, as the soul could never die, and the fall had brought upon all mankind a *spiritual death* as well as a temporal, *that is, they were cut off from the presence of the Lord*, it was expedient that mankind should be reclaimed from this spiritual death” (42:9).

Alma clearly equates being cut off from the presence of the Lord with spiritual death, and he continues to expand on spiritual death as a way of being. Alma’s existential emphasis is very important because it is a critical counterpart to understanding eternal life as being spiritually minded. Alma explains that because of the fall, spiritual death was shared by all, but that because of Christ’s atonement, this death was not permanent and we are able to return to God’s presence: “Therefore, as they had *become carnal, sensual, and devilish, by nature*, this probationary state became a state for them to prepare; it became a preparatory state. And now remember, my son, if it were not for the plan of redemption, (*laying it aside*) as soon as they were dead their souls were miserable, being *cut off from the presence of the Lord*” (Alma 42:10–11). Because of Christ’s redemption we can reverse this death by being born of God, becoming spiritually alive and restored to God’s presence.

Without the atonement to give the possibility of being born of God and having new life through Christ, our state as fallen and unclean beings would consign us to forever be cut off from his presence: “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*. And now, 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” (Alma 42:14–15).

Christ gives us a chance to choose. As Lehi testified, we are “free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil” (2 Nephi 2:27). In this discussion with Corianton, Alma develops the same themes found in Lehi’s teaching in 2 Nephi 2 about agency, justice, and repentance. Alma uses the waters of life as an image for Christ and his atonement rather than the tree that Lehi invites his family to come to in 1 Nephi 8, but both teach the same principle. We decide if we live or if we die. “Therefore, O my son, whosoever will come may come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds” (Alma 42:27).

Alma invites Corianton to choose life, to be born again, to live in the presence of God. He invites him to do as he has done to find joy and life through tasting the fruit of repentance and then sharing that with others: “And now, O my son, ye are called of God to preach the word unto this people. And now, my son, go thy way, declare the word with truth and soberness, that thou mayest bring souls unto repentance, that the great plan of mercy may have claim upon them” (Alma 42:31). Corianton is free to choose and once he tastes that fruit he too will want others to come and taste it as well.

While an invitation to preach repentance might seem bland or run-of-the-mill, given the experiences that Alma has recounted of what his repentance brought him to in these chapters—tasting joy and being born again—this closing invitation to Corianton is an invitation to follow in his father’s footsteps in the greatest calling of all: “Yea, and 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” (Alma 36:24). Alma has found life in Christ, and he wants all of his children

and all of Heavenly Father's children to find that life as well. Being born of God and being filled with the Holy Ghost are the joyful fruit of faith in Christ and repentance.

Conclusion

In Alma 32–33, Alma compared the word to a seed that we plant. The word that Alma shared and that he asked Corianton to share is the good news that we can have life eternal through Jesus Christ. We are born again to this new life through making covenants and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, but tasting the exceeding joy of the fruit of repentance will not endure if we do not continue down the covenant path of repentance and sanctification. Alma's commentary in Alma 32–33 makes it clear that planting the word of Christ's redemption in our hearts and cultivating it with faith, patience, diligence, and long-suffering is a long-term process that allows us to finally experience not just a present born-of-God moment of joy being in God's presence but a future born-of-God way of being, experiencing eternal joy as heirs of eternal life. "I desire that ye shall plant this word in your hearts, and as it beginneth to swell even so nourish it by your faith. And behold, it will become a tree, springing up in you unto everlasting life" (Alma 33:23). Elder D. Todd Christofferson explains, "Being born again, unlike our physical birth, is more a process than an event" and "engaging in [the] *process* is the central purpose of mortality." He warns, "let us not justify ourselves in a casual effort. Let us not be content to retain some disposition to do evil. Let us worthily partake of the sacrament each week and *continue to draw upon the Holy Spirit to root out the last vestiges of impurity within us*. I testify that as you *continue in the path of spiritual rebirth*, the atoning grace of Jesus Christ will take away your sins and the stain of those sins in you, temptations will lose their appeal, and through Christ you will become holy, as He and our Father are holy."⁸

Drawing "upon the Holy Spirit to root out the last vestiges of impurity within us" will bear fruit. As we stay at the tree and continue

to partake of the fruit of repentance, we will be transformed. By staying with Christ, faithful to our covenants, we can continue to be filled with the Holy Ghost in the present, remaining in the presence of God, until the future time comes when “he shall appear [and] we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure” (Moroni 7:48).

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Notes

1. Russell M. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival,” *Ensign*, November 2016, 84.
2. Guide to the Scriptures, “born of God” or “born again,” <https://www.ChurchofJesusChrist.org/scriptures/gs/born-again-born-of-god>.
3. See Jennifer C. Lane, “The Presence of the Lord,” in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 119–34.
4. James E. Faust, “Born Again,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 55; emphasis added.
5. David A. Bednar, “Ye Must Be Born Again,” *Ensign*, May 2007, 21.
6. Ezra Taft Benson, “Born of God,” *Ensign*, November 1985, 6; emphasis added.
7. Bednar, “Ye Must Be Born Again,” 19–22.
8. D. Todd Christofferson, “Born Again,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 78; emphasis added.