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LAMAN AND LEMUEL: A CASE
STUDY IN “NOT BECOMING”*Michael A. Goodman*

We can easily see Laman and Lemuel as being lost from the start. Almost like stock characters in a novel, they may appear to have little depth or complexity. This simplistic view makes it hard to identify the reasons behind, as well as the consequences of, Laman and Lemuel's behavior. Consequently, if we do not look for deeper meaning in Laman and Lemuel's story, we may fail to identify the necessary precepts to avoid the pitfalls they fell into and to which we are vulnerable today.

Through a more contextual view of Laman and Lemuel's lives, we are provided with a set of precepts to help us thrive spiritually in our day. As President Spencer W. Kimball taught, to be “forewarned is [to be] forearmed.”¹ Ultimately, Laman and Lemuel's lack of faith in and incorrect understanding of God led to their failure to become the righteous sons of God they were intended to be.

The Book of Mormon often teaches principles by contrast, or through opposites.² Readers learn the value of freedom as they view the consequences of captivity. They learn the joy of righteousness by

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viewing the price of wickedness. Some wonder why Mormon included so many examples of wickedness in a book meant to bring us to Christ. One reason is to warn against all things that might take us away from the Savior. Hugh Nibley noted: “To the casual reader it might seem that the Book of Mormon refers too much to evil-doing and ‘all manner of iniquity.’ But the reasons for this emphasis on the ways of the wicked are fully explained by the book itself. They are meant as a warning and example to that peculiarly wicked age for which the Book of Mormon message has been preserved and to which it is addressed.”³

A careful study of Laman and Lemuel can provide great insights into our own situation. Consider the following historical narrative that selectively omits Laman and Lemuel’s unrighteous behavior. Laman and Lemuel agreed to leave everything they possessed and journey into the wilderness to an unknown location at their father’s request (see 1 Nephi 2:4). This involved not only leaving their material possessions but also their hopes and dreams of a future among the only people they knew. They agreed to travel a three-day journey back to Jerusalem to fulfill the request of their father and the Lord to bring back the plates (see 1 Nephi 3:9). They agreed to approach Laban and request the records, surely suspecting that the success of such a request was not likely (see 1 Nephi 3:11–14). When their first attempt failed, they agreed once again, at Nephi’s suggestion, to sacrifice all their family wealth in an attempt to secure the scriptural record (see 1 Nephi 3:22). They dutifully returned to the tent of their father after successfully obtaining the plates (see 1 Nephi 4:38). Once there “they did rejoice exceedingly, and did offer sacrifice and burnt offerings unto the Lord; and they gave thanks unto the God of Israel” (1 Nephi 5:9).

They were soon commanded to return to Jerusalem again. This time they were to petition Ishmael’s family to sacrifice everything and join them on their journey to a still-unknown promised land. They agreed to this without murmuring (see 1 Nephi 7:3). They returned once again to the tent of their father in the wilderness after succeeding in their mission. While there, Lehi had a dream and shared it with his children. Laman and Lemuel inquired as to the meaning of the dream (see 1 Nephi 15:2–3, 7). They were “pacified and did humble themselves before the Lord” as they began to understand the meaning of the dream

(1 Nephi 15:20). They continued to inquire about the meaning of their father's dreams (see 1 Nephi 15:21–26), and they did “humble themselves” again before the Lord (1 Nephi 16:5). They commenced building a ship that ultimately carried them beyond the hope of ever returning to their homeland again. After travailing in the wilderness for over a decade, they arrived in the promised land (see 1 Nephi 18:23). Finally, before his death, Lehi blessed them and promised them the birthright blessing on conditions of righteousness: “And he spake unto them concerning their rebellions upon the waters, and the mercies of God in sparing their lives, that they were not swallowed up in the sea. . . . But, said he, notwithstanding our afflictions, we have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other lands; a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a land for the inheritance of my seed. Yea, the Lord hath covenanted this land unto me, and to my children forever, and also all those who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord” (2 Nephi 1:2, 5).

FAILURE TO EXERCISE FAITH

Even though this account of mostly correct choices seems to apply more easily to Lehi's two younger sons, Nephi and Sam, it is in reality the beginning of Laman and Lemuel's tragic story. How could this tale of obedience and sacrifice possibly apply to Laman and Lemuel, who eventually separated from their family and became truly wicked? (see 2 Nephi 5). The answer to this question is a key to discovering, as well as applying, important precepts and principles in our own lives. As shown, righteous actions may not lead to *becoming* righteous if our faith is not centered in Jesus Christ. Understanding this removes the unrealistic façade from Laman and Lemuel and allows us to liken their experience to ourselves. It is likely that sincere Church members rarely gain much from comparing their life experiences with the oversimplified vilification of Laman and Lemuel. Most of us are not trying to murder our family members. The scriptures provide ample clues to help us more accurately understand this story and thereby apply the pertinent principles in our lives more readily.

The history of righteous actions mentioned previously does not negate or necessarily mitigate Laman and Lemuel's wickedness. As one

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scholar put it, Laman and Lemuel “emerge as fundamentally corrupt men.”⁴ Instead, the history places their unrighteousness in a context that allows lessons to be more applicable and makes their story even more tragic as we realize their potential and their failure to live worthy of receiving blessings. Lehi never gave up on his two eldest sons and even promised them the birthright blessing if they would soften their hearts and repent. Lehi did not just wish for their repentance as he was dying. Laman and Lemuel had humbled themselves and had submitted to the Lord no fewer than six times throughout their lives (see 1 Nephi 7:19–21; 15:20; 16:5, 22–24, 32; 17:53–55; 18:1–4, 20). One time they felt such remorse that they bowed down before their younger brother and pled for his forgiveness (see 1 Nephi 7:20–21). However, Laman and Lemuel ultimately refused to humble themselves and turned away from the Lord. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell explained, “Laman and Lemuel became rebels instead of leaders, resentful instead of righteous—all because of their failure to understand either the character or the purposes of God.”⁵ Understanding the reasons for this failure to live up to their potential provides a fruitful field from which to harvest saving principles for our lives.

FAILURE TO OVERCOME FALLEN NATURE

Four personal weaknesses become obvious as we study the lives of Laman and Lemuel: pride, worldliness, slothfulness, and anger. These weaknesses inhibited them from developing a living faith in Christ and laid the groundwork for their complete rejection of God. Each weakness was not only a symptom of but also a reason for their failure to come unto Christ and be saved. Ultimately, it was Laman and Lemuel’s failure to develop living faith in Christ that prevented them from overcoming their personal weaknesses and led to their spiritual destruction. The Savior promises to help us overcome our weaknesses and redeem us from our fallen state (see Ether 12:27). Laman and Lemuel’s failure to develop faith in Christ left them to battle their weakness by themselves, ultimately a losing cause. Their refusal to “grow up in Christ”⁶ left them to become “for themselves” (see 3 Nephi 1:29). Therefore, even though Laman and Lemuel *did* many good things, when left to their own merits, they failed to *become* what the Savior desired them to become.⁷ To

better understand how this happened, it is helpful to examine the relationship between these four weaknesses and Laman and Lemuel's lack of faith in Christ.

Pride was a fundamental problem for Laman and Lemuel. In their commentary, Reynolds and Sjodahl wrote: "The great weakness of Laman was his pride. He was a man with a strong personality, capable of impressing others as a leader. He, no doubt, had as much education as his younger brothers. He was skilled in oratory, and he had the legal advantage of being the firstborn. But with all these qualifications he was weak, because he lacked humility."⁸ Laman and Lemuel's pride is evident throughout the scriptural record. They always claimed their right to rule over their siblings (see 1 Nephi 16:37; 2 Nephi 5:3). They continually chafed under the directing hand of Lehi. Even with a belief in God,⁹ they regularly questioned His guidance and commandments, especially when it came through their brother or their father (see 1 Nephi 2:11; 3:31; 7:6; 17:18).

Ultimately, pride precluded the possibility of their spiritual growth. It made the requisite dose of humility unobtainable: "Humility is a concept that plays an essential role in the origins of spirituality. Naturally, there are other important considerations, but the scriptures are clear and consistent on two points regarding humility and spirituality. First, the absence of humility virtually precludes the development of spirituality. And, second, the presence of humility is essential for spiritual growth."¹⁰

Likewise, a materialistic orientation kept Laman and Lemuel's focus earthbound. One author stated that "Laman can be viewed as a prototype of the 'natural man.'"¹¹ From their first complaint at having to leave their possessions behind (see 1 Nephi 2:11) to their lament on the seashore (see 1 Nephi 17:21), Laman and Lemuel continually focused on worldly things. This focus made it hard for them to appreciate spiritual manifestations, even when those manifestations led them through the "more fertile parts of the wilderness" (see 1 Nephi 16:16). President James E. Faust taught, "As the scales of worldliness are taken from our eyes, we see more clearly who we are and what our responsibilities are concerning our divine destiny."¹² Laman and Lemuel were never able to see clearly through the lens of worldliness through which they had

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chosen to view life. Laman and Lemuel's worldliness decreased the possibility that they would focus on the things of the Spirit. This kept them from viewing Christ as a necessary part of their lives.

In connection with Laman and Lemuel's pride and worldly focus, they were slothful and easily discouraged when faced with difficult tasks. This further complicated any effort to build a relationship with God. When they were sent back to get the plates, they complained that it was a "hard thing" Lehi required of them (see 1 Nephi 3:5). When their first attempt failed, they wanted to give up and go back (see 1 Nephi 3:14). When Laman and Lemuel didn't understand Lehi's words, they would argue among themselves and even ask Nephi about their meaning; but they refused to exercise the faith and effort necessary to obtain an answer from the Lord (see 1 Nephi 15:8–9). Their lament that "the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us" was not an indictment of God but of their own lack of effort.

When their bows lost their springs and Nephi's bow broke, Laman and Lemuel murmured instead of working to find a solution (see 1 Nephi 16:20). When Nephi was commanded to build a ship, they "were desirous that they might not labor" (1 Nephi 17:18). Laman and Lemuel showed a consistent pattern of slothfulness in starting tasks commanded by the Lord and were easily discouraged when those tasks proved difficult. One scholar refers to part of this problem as the "wilderness factor." He questions Laman and Lemuel's willingness to adjust to the hardships of the wilderness. "As the hardships of their journey increased, perhaps Laman and Lemuel began to lose faith in the entire venture and became defensive when Lehi and Nephi continued to attribute their journeyings to the Lord's will."¹³

These examples clearly illustrate that it is impossible to sustain a relationship with God without the requisite effort and sacrifice. Hugh Nibley wrote: "We cannot enjoy optional obedience to the law of God, or place our own limits on the law of sacrifice, or mitigate the charges of righteous conduct connected with the law of the gospel. We cannot be willing to sacrifice only that which is convenient to part with, and then expect a reward. The Atonement is everything; it is not to be had 'on the cheap.'"¹⁴

Finally, when Laman and Lemuel refused to obey the Lord's

commandments, they were inevitably censured by Lehi, Nephi, or an angel of the Lord. Because of the hardness of their hearts, they typically refused to accept correction and chose to be offended. This further stunted their spiritual growth and reduced the possibility of a meaningful relationship with the Lord. Nephi did not even have to rebuke them to make them angry. He simply had to be an example of obedience. “Just as Abel’s righteousness aroused Cain’s hatred, so Nephi’s righteousness aroused the hatred of Laman and Lemuel.”¹⁵

In fact, Laman and Lemuel’s most serious outbursts and wickedness flowed from uncontrolled anger at being rebuked. When Nephi rebuked them for their desire to return to Jerusalem, they became so angry that they bound him and “sought to take away my [Nephi’s] life.” (1 Nephi 7:16). When Nephi rebuked them for their unwillingness to help build the ship, “they were angry with me [Nephi], and were desirous to throw me into the depths of the sea” (1 Nephi 17:48). When Nephi rebuked them for their rudeness on the boat, Laman and Lemuel once again were angry with Nephi and tied him up (see 1 Nephi 18:10–11). Ultimately, their anger at Nephi’s rebukes led them to seek his life. Each of their murderous attempts came because of uncontrolled anger at being rebuked.

As with each of the weaknesses reviewed previously, Laman and Lemuel’s anger was not only a symptom of but also a reason for their failure to come unto Christ and be saved. In addition to the obvious wickedness engendered by their anger,¹⁶ the anger created a wedge between Laman, Lemuel, and those who were best situated to help them. It turned their hearts cold and hard, closed to the promptings of parents, siblings, and the Holy Spirit.

MISUNDERSTANDING THE TRUE NATURE OF GOD

According to the scriptural record, Laman and Lemuel never denied the reality of God. Unlike most mortals, they actually had angelic evidence of His existence. However, “they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them” (1 Nephi 2:12). They failed to understand the nature of their relationship with God and the nature of this probationary state. So even though God was a reality to Laman and Lemuel, He was largely irrelevant to them. They never drew upon His

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power to help them overcome their fallen state. They never progressed from a basic knowledge that God exists to having living faith in Him.

In many ways, Laman and Lemuel serve as a bad example of President Boyd K. Packer's dictum that "true doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior."¹⁷ Their understanding turned Jehovah into a god of convenience. For Laman and Lemuel, God was not central in their lives or in the lives of others. They wanted a god who was pleased by minimal efforts and who left life largely to them (see 1 Nephi 17:20–22). Their god was not a god of revelation. Even with the examples of a prophetic father and brother, they refused to pray to God because He "maketh no such thing known unto us" (1 Nephi 15:8–9). Clearly, the god of Laman and Lemuel's understanding is only loosely related to who God truly is. Elder Maxwell explained, "Their enormous errors [in understanding God's true nature] led to almost comical inconsistencies, such as Laman and Lemuel's believing that God could handle mighty Pharaoh and great Egypt's army at the Red Sea all right, but not a local Laban!"¹⁸

As a result of their misperception of God, they never developed the spiritual maturity that could have helped them overcome their weaknesses and "go on unto perfection" (see Joseph Smith Translation, Hebrews 6:3). As the scriptures make clear, Laman and Lemuel's failure to comprehend God was not due to lack of instruction. Lehi, Nephi, and angels ministered to them. It appears that through their choices and actions, they simply refused to comprehend what was being taught. Far from growing from grace to grace as the Savior did (see D&C 93:13), they never spiritually matured. Elder Richard G. Scott taught: "We are here on earth to gain experience we can obtain in no other way. We are given the opportunity to grow, to develop, and to gain spiritual maturity. To do that, we must learn to apply truth."¹⁹ Laman and Lemuel failed to learn and apply truth.

BECOMING SPIRITUALLY MATURE

Learning and applying truth with "real intent" leads to *becoming* spiritually mature. Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught: "It is not enough for anyone just to go through the motions. The commandments, ordinances, and covenants of the gospel are not a list of deposits required to be

made in some heavenly account. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a plan that shows us how to become what our Heavenly Father desires us to become.”²⁰ Elder Oaks went on to explain that “we are challenged to move through a process of conversion toward that status and condition called eternal life. This is achieved not just by doing what is right, but by doing it for the right reason—the pure love of Christ.”²¹ Though Laman and Lemuel did many things right, their lack of doing right things for the right reasons kept them from receiving blessings and experiencing growth. So it is in our day. Elder David A. Bednar has taught: “The issue is not going to church; rather, the issue is worshipping and renewing covenants as we attend church. The issue is not going to or through the temple; rather, the issue is having in our hearts the spirit, the covenants, and the ordinances of the Lord’s house. The issue is not going on a mission; rather, the issue is becoming a missionary and serving throughout our entire life with all of our heart, might, mind, and strength.”²²

How could Laman and Lemuel have grown to spiritual maturity and become like Christ? What can we learn from Laman and Lemuel’s failure that will help us “work out our salvation with fear and trembling”? (Philippians 2:12). Surely it takes a combination of righteous actions and a living faith in Jesus Christ. However, if our personal weaknesses deter us from developing faith in Christ—and if our lack of faith in Christ keeps us from overcoming our personal weaknesses—how do we break out of this downward cycle? As Elder Oaks mentioned, the ultimate motivation leading to righteousness is a pure love of Christ. Laman and Lemuel never developed this love for the Savior. Though we clearly must continue to emphasize righteous behavior, the best way to achieve our true potential is by developing a pure love for and faith in God. By focusing on God’s word and the Atonement of Jesus Christ, each of us will develop this pure love for and faith in God.

Focusing on God’s word as contained in the gospel is the beginning of developing faith in and a love for Christ. Speaking of the youth of the Church, President J. Reuben Clark Jr. taught: “These students already know that they must be honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and to do good to all men. . . . They should be encouraged in all proper ways to do these things which they know to be true. . . . These students fully sense the hollowness of teachings which would make the

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Gospel plan a mere system of ethics, they know that Christ's teachings are in the highest degree ethical, but they also know they are more than this. . . . These students hunger and thirst, as did their fathers before them, for a testimony of the things of the spirit and of the hereafter, and knowing that you cannot rationalize eternity, they seek faith, and the knowledge which follows faith."²³ As we come to know Heavenly Father and the Savior through their words, we develop a living faith and a love for them.

This knowledge and faith is most effectively learned from God's word. President Kimball's famous statement on scripture study emphasizes this important truth: "I find that when I get casual in my relationships with divinity and when it seems that no divine ear is listening and no divine voice is speaking, that I am far, far away. If I immerse myself in the scriptures the distance narrows and the spirituality returns."²⁴ Though Laman and Lemuel put forth great effort to get the scriptures from Laban, they did not put that same effort into immersing themselves in them and thus never came to truly know God.

Like Laman and Lemuel, we are all susceptible to an incorrect understanding of God and His gospel. Elder Scott spoke of the power of the scriptures to overcome false traditions and doctrinal misunderstandings. Recalling his efforts to lead a group of Church leaders nearer to the Savior, he said: "I realized in my heart that all the efforts that I had expended for six years in trying to help those beloved leaders overcome the effects of false traditions and learn to apply the teachings of the Lord would have been better directed had I strongly encouraged them to ponder and apply the teachings of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon contains messages that were divinely placed there to show how to correct the influence of false tradition and how to receive a fulness of life."²⁵ Just as Lehi and Nephi continually used the scriptures in their attempts to reach Laman and Lemuel, so must we "try the virtue of the word of God" (Alma 31:5) as we come unto Christ and invite others to do so.

Perhaps the most important thing we must emphasize in our attempt to "grow up" spiritually and come unto Christ is His infinite Atonement. President Howard W. Hunter explained that spiritual maturity is a direct result of understanding and applying the

Atonement: “Spiritual maturity comes when we understand the Atonement. . . . When we come to the point where we understand the atoning sacrifice of the Master, we are approaching a spiritual maturity. I don’t think spiritual maturity ever comes to us until we understand the true significance of the atoning sacrifice of the Master by which he gave his life that we might have life everlasting. When we understand the principle, we realize this is the greatest of love—that the Master laid down his life for us, that the grave will not be the end, but that we will live again.”²⁶ When we realize the priceless gift of love that the Savior offered through His Atonement, we experience a “mighty change” of heart (see Alma 5:12). We act out of love and gratitude, not only out of obedience and duty. This provides the motivation to overcome our personal weaknesses and also provides the divine assistance necessary for the task. Clearly, Laman and Lemuel failed to allow the Atonement to work in their lives and never developed the needed motivation and help.

In the end, like Laman and Lemuel, some people may ultimately refuse this priceless gift of love. As a result of not overcoming their fallen nature and failing to comprehend the nature of God and their relationship to Him, they may refuse to partake from the tree of life. However, understanding the possible reasons for this refusal enables each of us to more fully “come unto Christ, and be perfected in Him” (Moroni 10:32). We are then more able to help others avoid the same mistakes that ensnared Laman and Lemuel. The most powerful motivation to attain spiritual maturity and come unto Christ is to comprehend and understand all that the Savior has done for us. As we begin to understand and believe, we are motivated to repent (see Helaman 14:13; 3 Nephi 5:1–3). Through our repentance, the Atonement of Jesus Christ begins to cleanse and transform us into the “stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

NOTES

1. Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1972), 161.

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2. See Byron R. Merrill, *Elijah: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 31.
3. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 378.
4. Rodney Turner, in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, The Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 82.
5. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, October 1999, 7; or *Ensign*, November 1999, 8.
6. Erastus Snow and Benjamin Winchester, *Times and Seasons*, November 15, 1841, 578.
7. For further insights into this concept, see Dallin H. Oaks, in Conference Report, October 2000, 40; or *Ensign*, November 2000, 32.
8. George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Philip C. Reynolds (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955–61), 1:239.
9. Even though they lacked true faith in God, they nevertheless acknowledged His reality throughout the scriptural record (see 1 Nephi 3:29; 7:21; 15:8–9; 17:20–22).
10. Richard L. Bednar and Scott R. Peterson, *Spirituality and Self-Esteem: Developing the Inner Self* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 27.
11. See “Laman,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 492–93.
12. James E. Faust, in Conference Report, October 2000, 74; or *Ensign*, November 2000, 59.
13. Douglas E. Brinley, *Doctrines of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Bruce A. Van Orden and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 38.
14. Hugh Nibley, in *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 590.
15. Allen E. Bergin, in *The Book of Mormon: It Begins with Family* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 34.
16. For further insights into this concept, see David A. Bednar, in Conference Report, October 2006, 94–98; or *Ensign*, November 2006, 89–92; or Lynn G. Robbins, in Conference Report, April 1998, 105–6; or *Ensign*, May 1998, 80–81.
17. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, April 2004, 80; or *Ensign*, May 2004, 79.
18. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, October 1999, 6; or *Ensign*, November 1999, 7.
19. Richard G. Scott, in Conference Report, October 1989, 38; or *Ensign*, November 1989, 30.
20. Dallin H. Oaks, in Conference Report, October 2000, 40–41; or *Ensign*, November 2000, 32.
21. Dallin H. Oaks, *Ensign*, November 2000, 34; see also Moroni 7:6–9.
22. David A. Bednar, in Conference Report, October 2005, 47; or *Ensign*, November 2005, 45.
23. *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 6:49–50.

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24. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (2006), 67.
25. Richard G. Scott, in Conference Report, October 1988, 89; or *Ensign*, November 1988, 76.
26. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 8.