

# Bitter and Sweet: Dual Dimensions of the Tree of Life

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*Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? (James 3:11)*

Many readers of the Book of Mormon are familiar with the text in 1 Nephi 8, often referred to simply as “Lehi’s dream,” as well as the associated symbolism and interpretation revealed in Nephi’s vision in chapters 11 through 14. The centerpiece of the dream seems to focus on the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 11:2–10), whose fruit is described by Lehi as being “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.” Additionally, he states that “it was desirable above all other fruit” (1 Nephi 8:10–12). This symbolic tree and its associated fruit appear to be not only the same tree described in the Garden of Eden story but also the same described in Alma’s discourse: “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” (Alma 32:42).

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Regarding the fruit of the tree of life, a peculiar verse of scripture in 2 Nephi 2 may go unnoticed at first glance. But a closer look reveals a phrase that seems a bit confusing and almost contradictory. This verse lies between two powerful and succinct concepts—one teaching the doctrine of the Atonement (vv. 3–10) and the other the doctrine of the Fall (vv. 16–25). In 2 Nephi 2:15 we read, “And to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man, after he had created our first parents, and the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, and in fine, all things which are created, it must needs be that there was an opposition; *even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter*” (emphasis added).

The items of interest here are the different fruits. One is the forbidden fruit, obviously from the tree of knowledge of good and evil; the other, though not explicitly stated, is the fruit of the tree of life. At least two points of view become apparent when one seeks to make an interpretation of each type of fruit. First, a textual logic seems to indicate that the forbidden fruit is the one that is “sweet” because it is mentioned first and then so described in the latter part of the sentence. Similarly, the fruit of the tree of life appears to be the one that is “bitter” for the reasons described previously. However, there is a second possible meaning. When viewed from a chiasmic perspective, the fruit of tree of life could be the one that is sweet, while the forbidden fruit would be bitter.<sup>1</sup> In light of these two possibilities, it is interesting to note President Harold B. Lee’s commentary: “[God] set the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in opposition to the tree of life. The fruit of the one which was ‘bitter’ was the tree of life, and the forbidden fruit was the one which was ‘sweet to the taste.’”<sup>2</sup> President Lee’s interpretation of this scriptural verse clearly coincides with the first point of view.

What is the predicament then? Simply stated, one would think that the fruit of the tree of life is the fruit that is sweet, as Lehi explicitly states in 1 Nephi 8, not bitter as Lehi seems to later indicate in 2 Nephi 2. The question that this paper will seek to answer is this: Is the fruit of the tree of life bitter, sweet, or both? What are the implications for understanding this scriptural and doctrinal concept?

## Two Trees and Two Fruits

It might be asked how the fruit of the tree of life can be both sweet and bitter? Yet, this problem begs a similar question regarding the forbidden fruit:

is it bitter or sweet? Interestingly, the scriptural account of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3:6 seems to concur with Lehi's assessment that the forbidden fruit is actually the one that is sweet: "And when the woman saw that *the tree was good* for food, and that *it was pleasant* to the eyes, and a *tree to be desired to make one wise*, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat." Logic seems to indicate that if the fruit of the tree of life in Lehi's vision is sweet, then the forbidden fruit must therefore be bitter. It should be noted that the partaking of the forbidden fruit could be considered a "sweet" thing (i.e., good) in a certain sense. Later on in 2 Nephi 2 (which, again, seems to be referring to the forbidden fruit as the "sweet" fruit), we read the following: "Adam fell that men might be and men are that they might have joy" (v. 25). The action of partaking the forbidden fruit is perhaps bitter, but the long-term ramifications are sweet. That is to say, the partaking of the forbidden fruit was tactically a fault but strategically a success! Or, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks has declared, the Fall "was formally a transgression but eternally a glorious necessity to open the doorway toward eternal life."<sup>3</sup> Said Eve to Adam, "Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption" (Moses 5:11). Elder Orson F. Whitney explained, "The Fall had a two-fold direction—downward, yet forward. It brought man into the world and set his feet upon progression's highway."<sup>4</sup> Despite these observations, there is still the dilemma of the description of the fruit of the tree of life in Lehi's dream, wherein the fruit of the tree of life is described as sweet. How might this be so?

### Perspectives and Implications

Perhaps the answer to this simple dilemma can be found in the scriptural account of the Garden of Eden as found in the Pearl of Great Price, specifically, the verse in Moses 4:12; this verse reads almost identical to its counterpart in Genesis 3:6, but it has two very interesting, albeit small, changes: "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and *that it became pleasant* to the eyes, and a tree to be desired *to make her wise*, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and also gave unto her husband with her, and he did eat."

The phrase from Genesis "was pleasant" is changed to "became pleasant," perhaps suggesting that the forbidden fruit really isn't sweet at all—the

serpent just made it appear that way. In the end, sin is never sweet, or, as Alma would say, “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10). The chart below can serve as a model for what is being suggested. On the surface, Satan makes sin and transgression appealing through enticements, but in reality these things are bitter. Such is the assessment of King Benjamin, where he equates the forbidden fruit with the bitter realities of guilt, misery, and endless torment (Mosiah 3:25–26). Likewise, Alma equates partaking of the forbidden fruit with being “a lost and fallen people” (Alma 12:22).

	On the surface	Reality
Forbidden fruit	Sweet (by deception)	Bitter
Fruit of tree of life	Bitter (by deception)	Sweet

There may be times when the initial taste of sin is sweet or desirable to an individual. But once wickedness and perversion are swallowed and processed by our eternal spirits, we sadly discover the bitter reality of our choice. Although sin is and always will be bitter, one can experience (just as Eve did) a momentary pleasure or rush of seeming happiness or fun. These disguised delights and fleeting flashes of excitement might even last more than a few moments—perhaps a day, a week, or even longer. “But if it be not built upon my gospel, and is built upon the works of men, or upon the works of the devil, verily I say unto you *they have joy in their works for a season*, and by and by the end cometh, and they are hewn down and cast into the fire, from whence there is no return” (3 Nephi 27:11). It might sound strange that God would permit a person to “have joy” in sinning, albeit for a short season. One might think that an immediate divine punishment would be the best response to sin and to sinners.

President Spencer W. Kimball once gave this wise counsel:

Now, we find many people critical when a righteous person is killed, a young father or mother is taken from a family, or when violent deaths occur. Some become bitter when oft-repeated prayers seem unanswered. Some lose faith and turn sour when solemn administrations by holy men seem to be ignored and no restoration seems to come from repeated prayer. . . . But if all the sick were healed, if all the righteous were protected and the wicked destroyed, the whole program of the Father would be annulled and the basic principle of

the Gospel, free agency, would be ended. *If pain and sorrow and total punishment immediately followed the doing of evil, no soul would repeat a misdeed. If joy and peace and rewards were instantaneously given the doer of good, there could be no evil—all would do good and not because of the rightness of doing good.* There would be no test of strength, no development of character, no growth of powers, no free agency, no Satanic controls. Should all prayers be immediately answered according to our selfish desires and our limited understanding, then there would be little or no suffering, sorrow, disappointment, or even death; and if these were not, there would also be an absence of joy, success, resurrection, eternal life, and godhood.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, Satan would have us believe that the fruit of the tree of life is bitter, not sweet. Although the fruit of the tree is ultimately eternal life, all sons and daughters of God can taste small portions of this precious fruit as they adhere to principles of righteous living throughout their lives. Scripture study, prayer, tithes and offerings, service, Sabbath worship—these are all activities that the adversary would have us believe are bitter, unwanted, profitless, boring, and meaningless pursuits. Perhaps to the spiritually dead, such is the case. But “to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet” (Proverbs 27:7).

Obviously it is one of Satan’s tactics to blur the lines and meaning of good and evil. In his book *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis asserts that the adversary’s sophistry portrays Christ as “the tyrant of the universe.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the parable of the talents highlights a servant who receives but one talent and was unfaithful therewith. Then he complains to the Lord and even engages in name calling: “I knew thee that thou art an hard man” (Matthew 25:24). Elder James E. Talmage’s commentary is notable:

The unfaithful servant prefaced his report with a grumbling excuse, which involved the imputation of unrighteousness in the Master. The honest, diligent, faithful servants saw and revered in their Lord the perfection of the good qualities which they possessed in measured degree; the lazy and unprofitable serf, afflicted by distorted vision, professed to see in the Master his own base defects. The story in this particular, as in the other features relating to human acts and tendencies, is psychologically true; in a peculiar sense men are prone

to conceive of the attributes of God as comprising in augmented degree the dominant traits of their own nature.<sup>7</sup>

After all is said and done, “we see the end of him who perverteth the ways of the Lord; and thus we see that the devil will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell” (Alma 30:60). Thus, depending on one’s perspective, the fruit from either tree can be perceived as both bitter and sweet. The important thing, then, is to have the proper perspective. Perhaps this is what Isaiah was alluding to when he emphatically declared: “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put *bitter for sweet*, and *sweet for bitter!*” (Isaiah 5:20; emphasis added; compare 2 Nephi 15:20).

### The Close Proximity of the Bitter and Sweet

Although we should never mistake *sweet* for *bitter*, we should understand that these two adjectives are nonetheless intertwined and closely related to each other. It is interesting to note the nearness of the symbolic *tree of life* in Lehi’s dream to another symbol in his dream, mainly, the *river of water*: “And as I cast my eyes round about, that perhaps I might discover my family also, I beheld a river of water; and it ran along, and *it was near* the tree of which I was partaking the fruit” (1 Nephi 8:13, emphasis added). In Nephi’s subsequent vision, the river of water is a representation of the depths of hell and is described as containing “filthy water” that proceeds from a fountain (1 Nephi 12:16).

Also interesting in Lehi’s dream is the nearness of the filthy river to the iron rod that leads to the tree of life and its associated fruit: “And I beheld a rod of iron, and it extended along the bank of the river, and led to the tree by which I stood” (1 Nephi 8:19). Later, in Nephi’s vision, we learn the symbolism of the iron rod as Nephi answers questions from his brothers: “And they said unto me: What meaneth the rod of iron which our father saw, that led to the tree? And I said unto them that it was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction” (1 Nephi 15:23–24).

Thus it is apparent from Lehi’s symbolic dream that the river of filthy water runs alongside the iron rod, all the way to the tree of life. The point in this analysis is to highlight the proximity of the *sweet* to that which is *bitter*.

These two are always near to each other, that is, they run alongside each other from beginning to end! (see 1 Nephi 8:13). This geographical and symbolic occurrence points to a literal and sobering reality here in mortality. Although one might be holding to the iron rod and safely walking the strait and narrow path, sin is only a step away; or, as is the case with modern media and technology, it is sometimes only a “click” away! The same is true with any form of bitterness, whether it be sin or natural trials and adversity—there always seems to be a divine deference that allows joy and misery to seemingly be on the heels of each other incessantly. Elder Neal A. Maxwell once said: “So often in life a deserved blessing is quickly followed by a needed stretching. Spiritual exhilaration may be quickly followed by a vexation or temptation. Were it otherwise, extended spiritual reveries or immunities from adversity might induce in us a regrettable forgetfulness of others in deep need. *The sharp, side-by-side contrast of the sweet and the bitter is essential* until the very end of this brief, mortal experience.”<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, President Brigham Young taught: “Will sin be perfectly destroyed? No, it will not, for it is not so designed in the economy of Heaven. . . . Do not suppose that we shall ever in the flesh be free from temptations to sin. . . . We shall more or less feel the effects of sin so long as we live, and finally have to pass the ordeals of death.”<sup>9</sup>

We see this pattern repeated so often in the scriptures, especially with the tutoring and training of prophets, the “sharp, side-by-side” contrast of good and evil, that is, Joseph Smith and the First Vision, Moses in the Pearl of Great Price (see Moses 1), and even the vision of God and Christ in section 76, where the vision is immediately followed by the vision of Lucifer and the one third—the list of pedagogical foils goes on. Elder John A. Widtsoe declared: “Truth and untruth travel together side by side. Light and darkness both offer themselves to the seeker after truth, one to bless, the other to destroy mankind. Whenever a man sets out to seek truth, he will for a time be overtaken by evil. No seeker after truth is, therefore, ever free from temptation, from evil powers.”<sup>10</sup> This perplexing truth is declared and described beautifully in a poem by William Blake:

Joy & Woe are woven fine  
 A Clothing for the Soul divine  
 Under every grief & pine  
 Runs a joy with silken twine

It is right it should be so  
 Man was made for Joy and Woe  
 And when this we rightly know  
 Through the World we safely go<sup>11</sup>

With such close proximity between the sweet and bitter, we must be ever-vigilant. How do we avoid the filthy water? True it is that we cannot escape this world of sin. We can perhaps avoid sinning to some degree, but, as President Young states, we cannot ever avoid the temptation to sin. We must be in the world but not of the world. A wonderful principle found at the conclusion of Nephi's vision gives us a clue as to how this can be accomplished. While explaining to Laman and Lemuel the symbols of his vision (and his father's dream), Nephi gives the following instruction regarding the meaning of the river of water: "And I said unto them that the water which my father saw was filthiness; *and so much was his mind swallowed up in other things that he beheld not the filthiness of the water*" (1 Nephi 15:27). One of the keys to avoiding the ever-encroaching river of sin in our lives is to have our minds and actions focused on many other good and uplifting *things*—to the point where there is no time or interest in sin itself. It can be as though sin is not even there. Cognitively we may know it is there, but we are not perplexed or filled with undue anxiety over its existence. As Elder David A. Bednar taught, being "endowed with agency, we are agents, and we primarily are to act and not merely be acted upon."<sup>12</sup>

### How Bitter Is Bitter?

Having established that we should never mistake sweet for bitter or bitter for sweet, we thus face an interesting dilemma here in mortality wherein we cannot avoid tasting the bitter, while likewise experiencing the sweet. Both of these realities, as has been stated, appear intertwined and inextricably linked together: "And the Lord spake unto Adam, saying; Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good. And it is given unto them to know good from evil; wherefore they are agents unto themselves" (Moses 6:55–56). In this verse, sin is definitely equated with bitterness. But it is interesting to note that apparently we are to taste the bitter here in mortality in order "to prize the good," i.e., to taste the sweet. A passage from the Doctrine and Covenants seems to concur with Moses: "And it



must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves; for if they never should have bitter they could not know the sweet—wherefore, it came to pass that the devil tempted Adam, and he partook of the forbidden fruit and transgressed the commandment, wherein he became subject to the will of the devil, because he yielded unto temptation” (D&C 29:39–40).

Although it is a scriptural truth, that “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), are we to infer that to know and achieve righteousness we first must experience sin? Paul seems to clarify that such might not be case: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid.” (Romans 6:1–2) President Kimball’s words are instructive. He teaches that resistance to sin is better than repentance:

Another error into which some transgressors fall, because of the availability of God’s forgiveness, is the illusion that they are somehow stronger for having committed sin and then lived through the period of repentance. This simply is not true. That man who resists temptation and lives without sin is far better off than the man who has fallen, no matter how repentant the latter may be. The reformed transgressor, it is true, may be more understanding of one who falls into the same sin, and to that extent perhaps more helpful in the latter’s regeneration. But his sin and repentance have certainly not made him stronger than the consistently righteous person.<sup>13</sup>

Obviously, since we all sin, Christ is the spiritually strongest of all of Father’s spirit children; he is the only really consistently righteous person who has or ever will live (1 Nephi 10:6; D&C 82:2, 6; Romans 3:10–12, 23). However, this is not to say that he is unacquainted with the bitterness of trials, grief, affliction and temptation. Interestingly, it is because of His perfect righteousness that he understands the bitterness of sin so much more than the rest of humanity. C. S. Lewis’ words are memorable: “A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the [opposing] army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in

one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in.”<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, sin is bitter. But is bitterness always the same thing as sin? Trials are definitely part of our mortal probation, and we must experience “opposition in all things” in order to grow towards eternal life. Therefore, we must experience the bitter in order to prize the sweet. But, once again, must we experience the bitterness of sin? Elder Bruce C. Hafen once observed, “As part of an eternal plan, our Father placed us in this world subject to death, sin, sorrow, and misery—ALL of which serve the eternal purpose of letting us taste the bitter that we may learn to prize the sweet.”<sup>15</sup> On another occasion he remarked, “We might think of the degree of our personal fault for the bad things that happen in our lives as a continuum ranging from sin to adversity, with the degree of our fault dropping from high at one end of the spectrum to zero at the other. . . . Along this fault-level continuum, between the poles of sin and adversity, lie such intermediate points as unwise choices and hasty judgments. . . . Bitterness may taste the same, whatever its source, and it can destroy our peace, break our hearts, and separate us from God. Could it be that the great ‘at-one-ment’ of Christ could put back together the broken parts and give beauty to the ashes of experience such as this? I believe that it does, because *tasting the bitter in all its forms* is a deliberate part of the great plan of life.”<sup>16</sup>

We might ask if our bitter moments in life, whether through sin or adversity, have helped us to become humble. Have our fiery trials served the purpose of softening our hearts? We know we can either be humble because we so choose or because we are compelled to be so (see Alma 32:13–14). Elder Maxwell once said: “The returning prodigals are never numerous enough, but regularly some come back from ‘a far country’ (Luke 15:13). Of course, it is better if we are humbled ‘because of the word’ rather than being compelled by circumstances, yet the latter may do! (see Alma 32:13–14). Famine can induce spiritual hunger.”<sup>17</sup> Whether the bitter fruit is through sin or adversity or a combination of both, it should be sufficient to help us appreciate the sweet fruits of virtue, benevolence, and righteous living.

## Conclusion

Lehi’s dream is an entrancing narrative that, although symbolic, can teach many powerful life lessons, including the necessity of learning through

the experience of the sweet and the bitter. It could be said that this mortal probation is an experiential escalator. It is a realm of rigorous reality, tempering trials, and tough learning. The school of hard knocks is always in session. Our divine dean has given the demanding directive: "And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abraham 3:25). Although we might seek to skip class at times, we eventually discover the eternal truth that "it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11). Although some lessons are bitter, we rejoice in those moments that are sweet. We soon realize, if we are willing, that these two existing realities (the bitter and the sweet) are not mutually exclusive courses that can be taken through independent study; they are, rather, reinforcing and complementary classes that must be taken simultaneously, for "*all these things* shall give [us] experience, and shall be for [our] good" (D&C 122:7; emphasis added). Elder Maxwell perceptively observed that "God [is not] a kindly grandfather who would indulge mankind in whatever they wish to do. . . . Ours is a loving Father who will, if necessary, let come to each of us some harsh life experiences, that we might learn that his love for us is so great and so profound that he will let us suffer, as he did his Only Begotten Son in the flesh, that his and our triumph and learning might be complete and full."<sup>18</sup> May we learn our lessons well and always hold to the iron rod, seeking constantly for the fruit of that sacred knowledge and experience that 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" (Alma 32:42).

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## Notes

1. Chiasmus is a form of writing or speech in which various words or clauses are related to each other through a reversal of structure (i.e., inverted parallelism).

2. Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 364.

3. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Great Plan of Happiness," November 1993, 73.

4. Orson F. Whitney, in *Cowley and Whitney on Doctrine*, comp. Forace Green (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 287.

5. Spencer W. Kimball, "Tragedy or Destiny," *Improvement Era*, March 1966, 180, 210; emphasis added.

6. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1946), 136.

7. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 582.

8. Neal A. Maxwell, "Enduring Well," *Ensign*, April 1997, 7

9. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 10:173.
10. John A. Widtsoe, "The Significance of the First Vision," Fourth Annual Joseph Smith Memorial Sermon, Logan Institute of Religion, December 8, 1946, 2.
11. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 494–95.
12. David A. Bednar, "Watching with All Perseverance," May 2010, 43; see also 2 Nephi 2:14.
13. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), 357.
14. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 142.
15. Bruce C. Hafen, "Elder Bruce C. Hafen Speaks on Same-Sex Attraction," address at Evergreen International Nineteenth Annual Conference, September 19, 2009, 2.
16. Hafen, "Beauty for Ashes" and the Restored Doctrine of the Atonement (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 12–15.
17. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Tugs and Pulls of the World," November 2000, 36.
18. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Gospel Gives Answers to Life's Problems," *Liabona*, February 1978, 36.