

# Illuminating a Darkened World

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**I**t is no mystery that we live in a dark and troubled world of lewdness, deceit, and selfishness; a time when “every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god” (D&C 1:16); a time when many put “darkness for light, and light for darkness” (Isaiah 5:20; 2 Nephi 15:20); even a time when light shines in darkness and the “darkness comprehendeth it not” (Isaiah 5:20; D&C 45:7). The Lord has declared that “darkness covereth the earth, and gross darkness the minds of the people” (D&C 112:23), so in such darkness of mind and sight, how will one fully acquire gospel light? President Boyd K. Packer suggests that an answer may be found in Lehi’s dream. Said he, “Lehi’s dream or vision . . . has in it everything a Latter-day Saint needs to understand the test of life.”<sup>1</sup> In studying Lehi’s dream and his son Nephi’s subsequent vision, it appears that what they *experienced* in the revelation process was as enlightening as what they *saw*. These vision experiences present the disciple of Christ with a parabolic guide that highlights how mankind may illuminate a dark and dreary waste into a sensible world of purpose and pitfall. The objective of this paper is to help the reader gain new insights into

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the symbolism of events (not just items) experienced in Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision, thereby encouraging renewed desire to follow the prophets in tasting and remaining at the fruit-bearing tree.

### Illuminating a Darkened World

Lehi was a man of faith, love, and obedience. When he heard prophets preach concerning the destruction of his city, he lovingly prayed for the people with "all his heart" (1 Nephi 1:5). His affectionate prayer for others yielded revelation wherein he read and saw marvelous things that further witnessed the destruction coming upon Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 1:13). Despite their mocking, he testified to his people of the things he had seen and heard until their anger led them to seek his life (see 1 Nephi 1:20). Then, recognizing the tender mercies of the Lord, Lehi obeyed revelatory commands to take his family and flee into the wilderness (see 1 Nephi 2:3–4). In the wilderness he tenderly pled, "being filled with the Spirit," for his sons to be faithful and obedient to the commands of God (1 Nephi 2:14). Twice he would heed revelations from the Lord commanding his sons to return to Jerusalem. All throughout his life, and even on his deathbed, he taught, begged, and pleaded with his children to listen to the Lord and hearken to their prophetic brother, Nephi (see 2 Nephi 2:28). There is no doubt that he loved his children, his people, and the Lord. Such love, faithfulness, and obedience were clearly evident in all his actions and invited revelations—revelations that illuminated his understanding.

While encamped along the borders of the Red Sea and not long after the return of his sons with Ishmael's family, Lehi received the glorious vision of the tree of life. Whether it occurred in a night dream, during prayer, or after offering sacrifice, the record does not say, but this much is known: a dream was dreamed; or, in other words, a vision was beheld (see 1 Nephi 8:2). The revelatory experience begins with Lehi seeing a man dressed in a white robe (see 1 Nephi 8:4–5). It is significant that the man came and stood before him, inviting him to follow (see 1 Nephi 8:6). Upon fulfilling this request, Lehi found himself in a dark and dreary wasteland. Hours went by as Lehi experienced traveling in darkness, perhaps feeling abandoned, confused, and alone. Strange it is that the white-robed man he dutifully chose to follow is seemingly lost from his view. Discouraged, desperate, and lost in darkness, Lehi began an emphatic prayer to God for mercy (see 1 Nephi 8:8). The record

makes clear that *after* Lehi prayed, he “beheld a large and spacious field” (1 Nephi 8:9). The dark and dreary wasteland he was wandering through was never spoken of again. It is as if his prayer enlightened him to see that the waste he was trudging through was, in fact, a large and spacious field, even a world (see 1 Nephi 8:9, 20).

The beginning of Lehi’s dream experience is symbolically significant and parallels our own journey to mortality. Like Lehi, all people on this earth once chose to follow the invitations of a white-robed man (see Daniel 10:2–12). This man stood before us in the premortal world and bade us follow him. Those who did so found themselves born into a place that may seem dark and dreary, even purposeless. Memories of the world before and the man followed there were wiped clean, and many wandered in darkness, some for numerous hours and others for a lifetime. Mercifully, some in darkness eventually come to the same resolution as Lehi, or young Joseph Smith Jr., who concluded, “I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or . . . ask of God” (Joseph Smith—History 1:13). Only after sincere prayer and pleading to the Lord for mercy do we begin to see clearly and have the cloud of darkness dispelled from our minds.<sup>2</sup> Experiencing such enlightenment makes us aware of our true surroundings and blessings; suddenly the dreary wasteland we have been wandering illuminates, and we behold, as did Lehi, a spacious field that is, in fact, a world! (see 1 Nephi 8:20; see also Matthew 13:38). Perhaps the words of a well-known hymn are appropriate: “So when life gets dark and dreary, don’t forget to pray. . . . Prayer will change the night to day!”<sup>3</sup>

Consider the children of Lehi, who followed their father’s commands to leave the comforts of home and embark on a twelve- to fourteen-day journey through the treacherous, hot, barren wasteland between Jerusalem and the Red Sea.<sup>4</sup> Could you imagine this dark and dreary trip? The record makes clear that Nephi, Lehi’s fourth son, is in his youth, even “exceedingly young” (1 Nephi 2:16). Because Nephi’s older brethren were unmarried, they were likely also fairly young and perhaps still in their teens or early twenties.<sup>5</sup> Parents with youth this age could rightly imagine the fights, complaining, questions, and conversations that would erupt during such an arduous journey. Are we there yet? Where are we going? Why are we going? Can we rest? When are we coming back? Laman’s throwing rocks! My camel stinks! and so forth. The record verifies that Laman and Lemuel murmured about many things and did not believe Lehi’s teachings that Jerusalem “could be

destroyed” (1 Nephi 2:13; see vv. 11–12). Their minds were darkened to the prophet’s words.

Nephi gives additional insight into Laman’s and Lemuel’s spiritually dark minds when he writes that “they knew not the dealings that of God who had created them” and were like those at Jerusalem who were seeking to “take away the life of my father” (1 Nephi 2:12–13). Their spiritually closed minds were so dark to the workings of the Lord that they could not understand the words of Lehi, even when he spoke so powerfully by the Spirit that it confounded them (see 1 Nephi 2:14; 15:1–7). Nephi would later comment that they were “past feeling” and could not feel the words of the Spirit, just as none of the wicked could “understand great knowledge, when it [was] given unto them in plainness” (1 Nephi 17:45; 2 Nephi 32:7).

Though Nephi wrote his scriptural account of leaving Jerusalem some twenty years after the fact, it appears he personally had no complaints at his father’s requests but was completely faithful to the prophet’s commands (see 1 Nephi 19).<sup>6</sup> However, the record does hint that perhaps Nephi was not always cheery and excited about abruptly leaving his comfortable life in Jerusalem. A close look at Nephi’s own words reveals that his heart at one time was slightly hardened. Wrote Nephi, “He . . . did *soften* my heart that I did believe” (1 Nephi 2:16; emphasis added). Perhaps in typical teenage fashion, even Nephi may have first experienced hardness of heart and feelings of doubt about the journey they were to make. For how could his heart be softened if it was not hard? Perhaps initially his mind was dark to the things which the Lord had revealed to his father, yet his reaction to his doubting is simply profound: “Having great *desires to know* of the mysteries of God, wherefore, *I did cry unto the Lord*; and behold he did visit me, and did *soften* my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father; wherefore, I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers” (1 Nephi 2:16; emphasis added).

Nephi’s reaction to hard-hearted, dark feelings was sincere prayer to God. Such a choice, though incredibly simple and plain, is key to illuminating understanding, for “he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day,” and then cometh the time that “there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things” (D&C 50:24; 88:67). After having his own personal revelatory experience, Nephi would happen

upon his unbelieving, arguing, and darkened brothers who still could not understand the words of their father's dream. Perhaps in frustration, Nephi asked, "Have ye inquired of the Lord?" (1 Nephi 15:8).

Nephi knew the keys to understanding and gaining spiritual light. From his wilderness experience, he learned that God answers prayers. He was visited of the Lord and knew that if people desire to know the things of God, they must diligently seek him out, which seeking would allow them to be taught the mysteries of God by the power of the Holy Ghost (see 1 Nephi 10:17–19). Because he knew that God was the same "yesterday, today, and forever" and believed that he could make all things known, Nephi was quick to seek personal revelation (1 Nephi 10:18; see 1 Nephi 10:19; 11:1). When Father Lehi finished relating his vision, Nephi immediately commented on his desire to see, hear, and know the things his father had seen (see 1 Nephi 10:17). Such desires led to diligent seeking that allowed Nephi to not only see all his father saw, but even to have explanations from the Spirit of God of all the things he desired (see 1 Nephi 11:6).

In the repetitive nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ, have Saints forgotten the simple power of prayer, the power that dispels darkness? Many General Authorities, including Elder Neal A. Maxwell, have reiterated President Brigham Young's assertion that "we live far beneath our privileges" in terms of receiving revelation from God for guidance.<sup>7</sup> It seems that too often many seek God out only when they are desperate, and, like Lehi, they pray, recognizing that they have wandered many hours in darkness. But what of spiritual darkness that is harder to recognize because it does not fall into the categories of trial, despair, or need? What of darkness that is felt but not initially perceived as destructive? What of the hard, inconvenient truths taught by prophets? Do those who call themselves Saints ask God to soften their hearts towards prophetic commands that do not conveniently harmonize with personal views and lifestyles? Do we pray for enlightenment about perceived burdens of home and visiting teaching, Church callings, Scouting, Sabbath observance, or Saturday sessions of conference? What of offending words, hearts that hold grudges, and unforgiving feelings that make us lash out in belittling gossip or silent treatment? Do we seek darkness-dispelling light through prayer in *these* times?

The power of sincere prayer is the ultimate act of faith and invites the Spirit of the Lord to drive out darkness of mind and hardness of heart. It

is the first step toward cognitive clarity and heart-softening light. Perhaps we would do well to remember that King Lamoni's conversion began with heartfelt pleadings to God for mercy, pleadings that caused him to fall to the earth in a spiritual coma (see Alma 18:41–42). Like Lehi, Lamoni began to experience the enlightening effect of a sincere petition to God. His perspective changed as light chased away the darkness of unbelief. Ammon knew this was happening; "he knew that the dark veil of unbelief was being cast away from his mind, and the light which did light up his mind, which was the light of the glory of God, which was a marvelous light of his goodness—yea, this light had infused such joy into his soul, the cloud of darkness having been dispelled, and that the light of everlasting life was lit up in his soul, yea, . . . this had overcome his natural frame, and he was carried away in God" (Alma 19:6). Immediately after experiencing this light of God and witnessing a vision of his Redeemer's birth and mission, Lamoni would joyfully testify of God's blessedness (see Alma 19:13).

These light-increasing prayers of Lehi and Lamoni are two of many scriptural accounts that affirm the power of prayer in inviting and receiving God's light in dark times. Nearly 510 years after the death of Nephi, approximately three hundred Lamanites struggled to flee a prison overshadowed with a thick cloud of darkness (see Helaman 5:49). Four times the earth had shaken, three times the voice of God was heard commanding repentance and speaking marvelous things, yet all the while they remained in darkness (see Helaman 5:27–33). In desperation, the Lamanites cried out, "What shall we do, that this cloud of darkness may be removed from overshadowing us?" (Helaman 5:40). A Church member who had dissented replied, "Cry unto the voice, even until ye shall have faith in Christ" (Helaman 5:41).

These Lamanites heeded the counsel and began to pray to the voice until the cloud of darkness was dispersed (see Helaman 5:42). Looking around, they found their vision illuminated and all saw that they were each encircled by a pillar of fire (see Helaman 5:43). This light filled their souls with unspeakable joy as the Holy Ghost entered into their hearts, giving them revelations that allowed them to speak marvelous words (see Helaman 5:43–45). Could there be any doubt that prayer brings illumination and understanding? It was faithful, consistent prayer that brought light to these Lamanites, joy to Lamoni, clarity to Lehi, softening to Nephi, and visions to all four. It is prayer that illuminates our darkened world.

### Learning by Faith: Our Path to Illumination

Lehi's prayer for mercy brought a world into view. His new, illuminated perspective allowed him to see not only a spacious field but also a glorious tree whose fruit is desirable to make one happy. With little or no recorded struggle, Lehi immediately went forth and partook of the fruit thereof (see 1 Nephi 8:11). After tasting the fruit, his vision increased, for he "beheld that it was most sweet" and white beyond anything he had ever before seen (1 Nephi 8:11). Though at first glance the tree's fruit appeared desirable, his awareness of the true quality thereof came only *after* partaking of it (see 1 Nephi 8:9–11).

It is evident that Lehi's faithful actions (following the invitation of the white-robed man, praying for mercy, going forth to the tree, partaking of the fruit) illuminate his understanding and allow him to see his surroundings more clearly. In his dream experience, the prophet Lehi learns *after* he righteously acts upon scenes presented before him. Elder David A. Bednar teaches that such learning is what the scriptures deem "learning by faith," a type of true spiritual learning that "involves the exercise of moral agency to act," bringing confirming instruction from the Spirit of the Lord.<sup>8</sup> The Spirit is the true teacher of gospel truth. When people teach by the Spirit, the "Holy Ghost carrieth it *unto* the hearts of the children of men" (2 Nephi 33:1; emphasis added), but only personal action (like the prayers of the Lamanities, Lehi, and Nephi) allows the Spirit to enter *into* the learner's heart (see Helaman 5:42–45; see also 2 Nephi 2:16).<sup>9</sup>

Lehi exemplifies such faith-inspired action all throughout his dream. He follows, prays, looks, goes forth, partakes, and ponders. Each action brings light to the next scene of the revelatory dream as it allows the Holy Ghost to speak to Lehi's *heart* and *mind* (see D&C 8:2–3). These actions are the *symbolic* events of the dream that give insights into making sense of this world. It is our faith-inspired action that yields "light that quickeneth [our] understandings" (D&C 88:11). Had Lehi not faithfully acted, he would have never comprehended the joy of the fruit or testified that he knew it was "desirable above all other fruit" (1 Nephi 8:12). Faithful action yields illumination by the Spirit of the Lord. Prayer is one basic form of that action and the starting point for all who remain in darkness, but there are many acts of faith required for full enlightenment.

Nephi's experience gives further insight into the principle of action in illuminating revelation. His desires, prayers, ponderings, beliefs, and asking

were actions that allowed him to be taught. Elder Bednar invited religious educators to “recall how Nephi desired to know about the things his father, Lehi, had seen in the vision of the tree of life. Interestingly, the Spirit of the Lord begins the tutorial with Nephi by asking the following question: ‘Behold, what desirest thou?’ (1 Nephi 11:2). Clearly the Spirit knew what Nephi desired. So why ask the question? The Holy Ghost was helping Nephi to act in the learning process and not simply be acted upon. Notice in 1 Nephi 11–14 how the Spirit both asked questions and encouraged Nephi to ‘look’ as active elements in the learning process.”<sup>10</sup>

Learning by the Spirit comes after we begin to act. Even Nephi’s simple action of looking invited the spirit into his heart to instruct him further. We learn in the Lectures on Faith that faith is “the first principle in revealed religion, and the foundation of all righteousness” and “the principle of action in all intelligent beings.”<sup>11</sup> Moroni testified that seekers received spiritual witnesses after they had faith, or, in other words, after they acted (see Ether 12:6). Seven times he referenced spiritual manifestations that resulted after faith, concluding with his testimony that God “workest *after* men have faith” (Ether 12:30; see also 12:6, 7, 12, 17, 18, 31). Lehi’s dream provides additional insights to the type of faith-inspired action that illuminates our view of the world, illumination that comes *after* acting.

Following his tasting of the fruit, Lehi straightway desires his family to partake. He begins searching the field to find them (see 1 Nephi 8:13). In his search he sees things he had not seen before as again his perspective broadens. First, he sees a river running by the tree where he stands. He discovers some of his family downriver, standing at the river’s head as if they “knew not whither they should go” (1 Nephi 8:14). How can it be that Sariah, Sam, and Nephi know not whither to go? Does not the brightness of the tree illuminate the darkness? Can they not see Lehi standing by it? Clearly he sees them! Perhaps their inability to see the tree lingers because they have yet to act in faith, while their father, even their prophet, sees them and desires that they behold and partake as he has.

In a loud beckoning voice Lehi calls to them, inviting them to come and eat the glorious fruit (see 1 Nephi 8:15). Sariah, Sam, and Nephi hearken to Lehi and come and partake. It appears that their view of the tree did not come until after they followed the prophet; an action providing them with illumination (see 1 Nephi 8:14–16). Laman and Lemuel, however, are not with



them. Looking more fervently at the head of the river, Lehi sees and calls to them, but they will not come. His earnest efforts to find and invite Laman and Lemuel seem fruitless, but such loving action is the very catalyst that allows the scene to illuminate further. It is after Lehi lovingly looks, finds, and invites Laman and Lemuel that he beholds a rod of iron and a strait and narrow path leading to the tree by which he stands (see 1 Nephi 8:20). The act of looking for others brings Lehi greater understanding of the world around him. We know that Lehi enjoyed savoring the fruit and its happiness before noticing that there was a river, a rod of iron, or a strait path leading to where he was. So did he arrive at the tree without any guiding aids? Was he completely devoid of the fear of slipping into a filthy river? Obviously no one would doubt Lehi's ability to walk the strait path or hold to the word of God, but perhaps full understanding of such guiding aids only illuminates *after* tasting the fruit and then looking back to help others arrive.

Elder David A. Bednar and others have taught that during scripture reading or commandment keeping, people rarely comprehend the personal spiritual growth occurring.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the Lord referenced the Lamanites, who during their conversion were “baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and *they knew it not*” (3 Nephi 9:20; emphasis added). However, after consistent faith, holding to the words of God, and keeping the commandments, many believers experienced tender mercies that showed how guided and blessed they really were. Consider the missionary who bears witness to his beliefs without complete testimony of their surety; this act of faith allows the missionary to experience President Packer's promise that a testimony is found in bearing it.<sup>13</sup> Does not the act of bearing testimony bring the Spirit *into* the heart of the bearer although it may only convey the Spirit *unto* the heart of the listener? (see 2 Nephi 33:1; Helaman 5:45). President Brigham Young commented, “More people have obtained a testimony while standing up trying to bear it than down on their knees praying for it.”<sup>14</sup> President Dieter F. Uchtdorf testified, “We must learn that in the Lord's plan, our understanding comes ‘line upon line, precept upon precept’ [2 Nephi 28:30]. In short, knowledge and understanding come at the price of patience. Often the deep valleys of our present will be understood only by looking back on them from the mountains of our future experience.”<sup>15</sup> The idiom “Hindsight is 20/20” surely applies to understanding the guidance of the Lord after we have acted.

Lehi followed the prophets, prayed fervently, kept the commandments of God, and searched the scriptures, all before experiencing his dream (see 1 Nephi 1:5, 18; 2:3; 5:10, 21). He held to the rod and walked the path. These faithful actions made it possible for Lehi to taste the fruit and have a revelatory experience, but the action of seeking to help others come and partake appears to be the faith-inspired action that illuminates the rest of the scene in his dream. For as Lehi was looking to guide others, he clearly beheld “a world” with numberless concourses of people “pressing forward, that they might obtain the path” (1 Nephi 8:20–21).

These multitudes came and began to walk in the path that led to the tree (see 1 Nephi 8:22). The record does not indicate whether they saw the tree clearly or only hoped the path was taking them somewhere they would want to be. However, it does mention them “pressing forward, that they might obtain the path which led unto the tree” (1 Nephi 8:21). Perhaps they were told about the tree and had been invited to walk in a path that led to it. It could also be that they recognized this path as one leading to light. Even if they could behold the tree at first, it is significant that there is no mention of these multitudes grasping the iron rod. Could they not see the rod even though it was only a few feet or even inches away from the path? Or did they choose not to see and hold to it? Possibly Lehi wondered the same thing as a mist of darkness overshadowed them and they blindly wandered off and were lost, having failed to anchor themselves tangibly to the path (see 1 Nephi 8:22–23).

Like many people in the world, these multitudes did not recognize the importance of the word of God, symbolized by the iron rod. Though it lay distinctly before them, they would not so much as reach out their hand in faith to grasp the stable guide. Instead, these concourses of people were content to wander off. It seems that they did not notice or feel the dark mist, for would not any human beings in their right minds reach out for help when suddenly bombarded by misty darkness? Lehi’s illuminated perspective allowed him to see their surroundings (mist, guiding rod, and path), but the multitude may not have fully recognized these things. In many ways Lehi can sympathize with parents like Elder Henry B. Eyring who, seeing the mists of darkness, feel “the anxiety of sensing danger [their] children cannot yet see.”<sup>16</sup>

Continuing to look, Lehi beheld others pressing forward who not only found the path, but “caught hold of the end of the rod of iron” (1 Nephi 8:24). When mists of darkness accumulated, this multitude continued to press

forward through the dark haze, clinging to the rod for guidance and support (see 1 Nephi 8:24). These came forth and partook of the fruit, but the immense joy of tasting was short-lived. Shortly after these people reached the tree, Lehi saw them looking around, ashamed (see 1 Nephi 8:24–25). He “cast [his] eyes round about,” looking to see why anyone would be ashamed to taste of such joy (1 Nephi 8:26). Again the world of his dream was illuminated, and Lehi saw for the first time what had symbolically always been there. Perceiving the vista on “the other side of the river,” Lehi beheld a great and spacious, foundationless building standing “high above the earth” (1 Nephi 8:26). Inside this mighty edifice, people of all ages and genders had the “attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who had come at and were partaking of the fruit” (1 Nephi 8:27). Such ridicule shamed these individuals, and though they had been enlightened by the tree and tasted its fruit, they fell away into “forbidden paths and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:28).

How could this be? These people had experienced guidance by the rod and walked the strait path. They had tasted of that which was most joyous to the soul! Undoubtedly, Lehi knew the pressures these at the tree may have experienced at the hands of worldly scoffing and ridicule. He had already endured the mockery of the Jews when he proclaimed to them the revelation wherein his “whole heart was filled” and “his soul did rejoice” (1 Nephi 1:15). Yet the world’s mocking, anger, and threats did not push Lehi away from the glory of the tree. He remained there, obediently looking to help others arrive.

As he was looking for and perhaps calling others to come to the tree, Lehi saw “other multitudes” (1 Nephi 8:30). Some made it to the tree and partook, “continually holding fast” (v.30) to the rod of iron. We have no record of these falling away from the tree—it seems that their continual holding exemplified stronger faith and commitment than the aforementioned ashamed individuals who were clinging to the rod. Elder Bednar offers this enlightening insight: “Clinging to the rod of iron suggests . . . only occasional ‘bursts’ of study or irregular dipping rather than consistent, ongoing immersion in the word of God. . . . People who pressed forward continually holding fast to the rod of iron . . . *consistently* read *and* studied *and* searched the words of Christ. Perhaps it was the constant flow of living water that saved the third group from perishing.”<sup>17</sup> So are Saints today *clingers* or *continual holders*?

True it is that many experience clinging instants of religious zeal when life becomes dark or dreary. They recognize the feelings of misty darkness

surrounding them and make new resolutions to seek the Lord. The question is, how long do these resolution efforts last? Are they merely moments in a lifetime when people cling strongly to the rod and strive to faithfully walk the path, or are they genuine, long-lasting efforts of repentance and continual grasping of the iron rod? When life gets easy and clear again, do they slacken their grip on the very thing that has stabilized them? Much like the pride cycle, which rotates from ease and blessings to pride, suffering, and repentance, the cling cycle seems to rotate from clinging in firm determination to slackened commitment, darkness, and recommitted clinging. Often it is the attitude of “when it is convenient” or “when I need it” that typifies the clinging multitude. Hence many fall away when perceived gospel needs do not match what the world considers essential to happiness. Others will fall onto forbidden paths when gospel living is not conveniently allowing them to shine in worldly eyes.

It is interesting to note that these clingers were quick to “cast their eyes about” after eating the fruit, as if looking to see if those in the spacious building approved of their actions (1 Nephi 8:25). Although their eyes were what the Savior deemed “the light of the body,” as the Savior later mentions, “if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If, therefore, the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!” (3 Nephi 13:22–23). This multitude’s eyes seemed to testify of the darkness within, as they cared more about the “world and the wisdom thereof” than they did of the glorious fruit of the tree (1 Nephi 11:35). This worldly focus darkened their minds, and they treated lightly the things they had received, wandered off in a dark-minded stupor, followed forbidden paths, and were lost (see 1 Nephi 8:28).

When Saints seek worldly direction from the great and spacious building, they leave the tree and walk back into the darkness. As he sought to know the meaning of his father’s symbolically rich dream, Nephi’s mind was illuminated and he was able to understand the true significance of the tree (see 1 Nephi 11). Elder Bednar summarizes Nephi’s tutelage, stating, “The tree of life is the central feature in the dream and is identified in 1 Nephi 11 as a representation of Jesus Christ. The fruit on the tree is a symbol for the blessings of the Savior’s Atonement.” No wonder darkness envelops those who leave the tree, for it is not just any tree they are leaving—it is the Light of the World! Only those who remain in that light can see clearly the guides and pitfalls of the world around them. A view from any other location is a perspective darkly misconstrued, tainted, and nonsensical.

Consider the last multitudes to come into Lehi's view; these were "feeling their way towards that great and spacious building" (1 Nephi 8:31). Why were they feeling their way? Could they not see its location in relation to themselves? What of the paths that led to it? Away from the Light of the World, these were in darkness; why else would they purposely fall into and drown in watery depths or wander in strange roads if they were able to see and knew how to get to the worldly building they desired? (see 1 Nephi 8:32). Clearly their vision was not clear. Though many perished in feeling their way toward worldly acceptance, there were great multitudes that successfully found and entered that strange building (see 1 Nephi 8:31, 33). Upon arrival, these begin to point a scorning finger of mockery towards Lehi and others at the tree (see 1 Nephi 8:33). It appears that the perspective of those in the building allowed them to see the tree, but what they saw it as remains a mystery. Was it light? Was it glorious? Surely their mocking attitude suggests a tainted view and understanding, but is that not how the world has always seen and treated the tree? Unquestionably, Nephi would argue that their perception of the tree was tainted, for in his vision he saw the Lamb of God lifted up, crucified, and slain, and multitudes gathered against his apostles; then, when the vision changed, he saw the same multitudes gathered in the great and spacious building (see 1 Nephi 11:31–35).

After seeing these last multitudes, Lehi's dream concluded and he was left to worry about his sons Laman and Lemuel. With all the "feeling of a tender parent," he begged them to hearken to him that they might not be "cast off from the presence of the Lord" (1 Nephi 8:36–37). His vision had impressed upon him the importance of guiding aides that led to the tree and its fruit. He had clearly seen the struggles involved in arriving and remaining at the tree. The magnitude of his vision was vast. The symbolism of the scenes before him was rich, but how intimately did this prophet's dream apply to all humankind? President Packer answered this question in his direct and loving way when he stated, "You may think that Lehi's dream or vision has no special meaning for you, but it does. You are in it; all of us are in it."<sup>18</sup> Such an apostolic insight begs all people to ask whether they are in light or darkness.

### Illuminating Where We Stand

President Packer insightfully counseled, "One word in this dream or vision should have special meaning to young Latter-day Saints. The word is *after*.

. . . It is *after* you have partaken of that fruit that your test will come.”<sup>19</sup> Lehi also experienced illumination and testing after acting in faith, for after partaking of the fruit he too was mocked by the world (see 1 Nephi 8:33). However, his ability to see clearly gave him the strength to remain at the tree and give no heed to the mocking crowd (see 1 Nephi 8:33). So what faithful actions performed after partaking of the fruit brought this clarity of vision? We can correctly assume that he never was looking to selfishly fill his belly with fruit or gain praise from those around him; rather, he was always engaged in looking to see what halted, shamed, or stopped people from staying in the light of the tree. Elder Dallin H. Oaks reminds us of Christ’s words: “He taught that each of us should follow Him by denying ourselves of selfish interests in order to serve others. ‘If any man will come after me [He said], let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it’ (Matthew 16:24–25; see also Matthew 10:39). . . . Those who are caught up in trying to save their lives by seeking the praise of the world are actually rejecting the Savior’s teaching that the only way to save our eternal life is to love one another and lose our lives in service.”<sup>20</sup> Only selfless seeking to help others arrive allowed Lehi to see the world clearly. That act of continued faith illuminated all the pitfalls, dangers, and temptations aimed to stop mankind from arriving at and remaining with Christ the Lord, symbolized in the dream as a glorious tree. Hence, we can gauge where we are in Lehi’s dream by determining whether we serve others or selfishly seek to satisfy our own desires.

The moment Latter-day Saints start focusing on selfish worldly accolades rather than looking to help others arrive is the moment their minds begin to darken and they wander from the tree. President Brigham Young once expressed his worst fear: that converted Saints would “get rich in this country, forget God and his people, wax fat, and kick themselves out of the Church and go to hell.”<sup>21</sup> Though wealth may lead some away from the tree and onto forbidden paths, there are more subtle worldly influences that sway Saints toward the great and spacious building. President Packer asserted, “Largely because of television, instead of looking over into that spacious building, we are, in effect, living inside of it. That is your fate in this generation. You are living in that great and spacious building.”<sup>22</sup> Because of this, the real question becomes, are we just living inside of the spacious building, or have we become a part of it?

Christ prayed to his Father, pleading for his disciples who were “*in the world,*” recognizing that “the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world” (see John 17:11, 14 emphasis added). He knew that these disciples would have the filth of worldliness all around but that they would neither join in nor seek the acceptance of those who did. They literally would be *in* the world, but not partakers of it. Though disciples today should follow these first apostolic stalwarts, there seem to be too many who acknowledge worldly wickedness but still live for worldly value and acceptance. These have unknowingly and slowly become part of the world they are living in.

Parents may stand inside the great and spacious building, unaware that their hearts are more concerned about what others think than what God feels. They may be trying to point their mission-aged son or struggling daughter to the tree of life and teach the need to serve the Lord, when in reality their blindness has led them to care more about what the ward and community might think than about the actual salvation of their child. What about the family who leaves church meetings for a sporting event or an early break-the-fast meal? Are parents still genuinely looking to help children and others arrive at the tree, or do selfish desires opaquely taint parental vision and cause them to justify gospel living according to worldly standards of the strange building? Even more blinded are those who adopt worldly definitions of family, morality, good media, and career success in the place of revealed counsel. Addressing this problem, Elder Robert D. Hales declared, “I caution all of us to avoid looking to the great and spacious building for answers to questions about our future pursuits, our companions, and our lifestyles. Instead, let us kneel and talk with our Heavenly Father, learn about our gifts and talents, find ways to develop them, make choices based on who we are and what we have been given.”<sup>23</sup>

Individuals too often become mentally clouded when their actions unknowingly give too much value to popularity, careers, relationships, entertainment, beauty, talents, sports, or academia. Soon they fall victim to Elder Oaks’s warnings to not allow “good” to become the robber of “best.”<sup>24</sup> Victims of this plight usually become clingers who find that convenience and perceived good endeavors are outweighing exact commandment keeping. These individuals stop looking to help others come to Christ and start drifting away from the radiance of the tree. Losing this radiance and light, their minds are darkened and perceptions tainted. No matter where they may stand in the

geography of Lehi's dream, they do not see the world for what it really is, but rather they see it "through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

### Conclusion

Satan is ever persistent in lulling the Church "away into carnal security" and thinking that "all is well in Zion" (2 Nephi 28:21). This deceptive lullaby stops many members from looking to help others arrive as they themselves slip away into a sleep of darkness. Suddenly these once faithful members do not see their children wandering off on strange roads. They do not see bad habits creeping into their own lives and the lives of their children. They fail to recognize truth and are offended easily. They do not see their growing pride and all of its destructive reactions and behaviors. In short, their minds are darkened and they lose sight of the reality that the building wherein they stand is foundationless!

Those who stand away from the tree do not fully see, but those who, like Lehi, remain at the tree are wholeheartedly engaged in looking to help others arrive. Lehi's complete understanding and perspective of his dream did not come all at once. It came by degrees as he prayed for mercy and learned by faith. Multiple times the events in Lehi's dream brought new light to the world he was in. These events were simply his actions of heartfelt prayer, obedience, and constant looking to help others arrive at the tree. His faithful actions allowed him to clearly see the pitfalls, temptations, darkness, and dangers that stand between mankind and the fruit of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Latter-day Saints, we might proclaim that we have tasted the fruit, but will we remain at the tree? Will we be like Lehi? Have we prayed to see clearly? Are we still consistently trying to help others arrive at the tree?

When John and Peter Whitmer were wondering what would be of greatest worth to them personally, God responded, "Declare repentance unto this people, that you may bring souls unto me, that *you may rest with them* in the kingdom of my Father; . . . [this] will be of the most worth unto you" (D&C 15:6; 16:6; emphasis added). When Saints seek to help others arrive, they will learn by faith, sincerely pray, and consistently hold to the word of God. They will always remain in the light of Christ, and even when this world is covered in thick darkness, their eyes will be illuminated, for where light is, darkness cannot be; and unless light diminishes, darkness cannot intrude, for "darkness cannot conquer light."<sup>25</sup>



## Notes

1. Boyd K. Packer, "Finding Ourselves in Lehi's Dream," *Ensign*, August 2010, 22.
2. Lamoni prayed mightily to God, exclaiming, "O Lord, have mercy; according to thy abundant mercy which thou hast had upon the people of Nephi, have upon me, and my people" (Alma 18:41). This prayer caused his strength to fail, and he lay helpless for two days and nights (see Alma 19:1). Mormon commented on the situation, saying that Ammon "knew that king Lamoni was under the power of God; he knew that the *dark veil* of unbelief was being cast away from his mind, and the light which did light up his mind, which was the light of the glory of God, which was a marvelous light of his goodness—yea, this light had infused such joy into his soul, the *cloud of darkness* having been dispelled, and that the light of everlasting life was lit up in his soul, yea, he knew that this had overcome his natural frame, and he was carried away in God" (Alma 19:6; emphasis added). Prayer to God for mercy does seem to have rending effects on the dark, veiled cloud of darkness caused by sin, unbelief, and ignorance.
3. Mary A. Pepper Kidder, "Did You Think to Pray?" *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 140.
4. The Book of Mormon institute study manual for students and other sources teach that the approximately 180-mile journey was infested anciently by many marauders. Lehi and his family would have traveled at least twelve to fourteen days to make such a journey by camel or horse. It could have taken even longer, as livestock, tents, and other necessities (e.g., water and food) may have slowed their journey. *Book of Mormon Student Manual: Religion 121–122* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 14.
5. "Nephi's Life Inspires Many in Times of Old and in Present," *Church News*, February 8, 1992. See also George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book: 1973).
6. Immediately after making it to the promised land, Nephi was commanded to make plates. However, he was not commanded to create the small plates (the set our text is from) until twelve to thirty years after leaving Jerusalem.
7. "Priesthood Leaders Worldwide Receive Training via Satellite," *Ensign*, April 2003, 76; see also Sheri L. Dew, "We Are Not Alone," *Ensign*, November 1998, 94; and Joe J. Christensen, "Toward Greater Spirituality: Ten Important Steps," *Tambuli*, August 1983, 23.
8. David A. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," *Ensign*, September 2007, 63; see also D&C 88:118.
9. Note that the Lamanites in the darkened prison (Helaman 5) heard the voice of God, saw prophets' faces illuminated, felt earthquakes when the Lord spoke, and recognized a spiritual cloud of darkness. But, however powerful the Spirit of the Lord was, it did not enter *into* their hearts until they acted and cried unto the voice themselves (see Helaman 5:42–45).
10. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," 63–64.
11. Joseph Smith, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 1, 6.
12. David A. Bednar, "More Diligent and Concerned at Home," *Ensign*, November 2009, 17–20. President Packer tells the story of his son in the mission field. "Several years ago I met one of our sons in the mission field in a distant part of the world. He

had been there for a year. His first question was this: 'Dad, what can I do to grow spiritually? I have tried so hard to grow spiritually and I just haven't made any progress.' That was his perception: to me it was otherwise. I could hardly believe the maturity, the spiritual growth that he had gained in just one year. He 'knew it not' for it had come as growth, not as a startling spiritual experience." Boyd K. Packer, "The Candle of the Lord," *Ensign*, January 1983, 54.

13. Boyd K. Packer, "The Candle of the Lord," *Ensign*, January 1983, 54.

14. Junius F. Wells, "Historic Sketch of the YMMIA," *Improvement Era*, June 1925, 715.

15. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Continue in Patience," *Ensign*, May 2010, 58.

16. Henry B. Eyring, "Let Us Raise Our Voice of Warning," *Ensign*, January 2009, 5.

17. David A. Bednar, "A Reservoir of Living Water" (address delivered at Church Educational System fireside, February 4, 2007), 7.

18. Packer, "Finding Ourselves in Lehi's Dream," 22.

19. Packer, "Finding Ourselves in Lehi's Dream," 22–23.

20. Dallin H. Oaks, "Unselfish Service," *Ensign*, May 2009, 93, 95.

21. Preston Nibley, *Brigham Young: The Man and His Work* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1965), 128.

22. Packer, "Finding Ourselves in Lehi's Dream," 23.

23. Robert D. Hales, "Our Essential Spiritual Agency," *Brigham Young University Speeches, 2010–2011* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2010), 4–5.

24. Dallin H. Oaks, "Good, Better, Best," *Ensign*, November 2007, 104–8.

25. Robert D. Hales, "Out of Darkness into His Marvelous Light," *Ensign*, May 2002, 69.