

# Remembering Redemption, Avoiding Idolatry

A Covenant Perspective on Caring for the Poor

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In our day, as latter-day Israel, a covenant perspective on abundance can help us overcome barriers to caring for the poor. Like the Israelites of old, it is when a prideful and idolatrous relationship with what we think is ours replaces a humble relationship with God that we limit our willingness to impart “our” substance. The Old Testament teaches us that remembering our redemption, our dependence on God, and his greatness allows us to avoid the idolatry of trusting in riches.

The connection between remembering redemption and avoiding idolatry is embedded in the first of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20: “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (20:2–3). I am using the term *idolatry* in the broader sense of having another god before God (20:3) rather than in the narrower sense of making and worshipping graven images (20:4).<sup>1</sup>

Remembering their redemption keeps Israel in a spirit of worship and dependence on God for all they have. Forgetting their redemption leads Israel to glorify themselves and set their hearts on their riches. These changed feelings about “their” wealth changes their feelings about caring for those in need.

While ancient Israel also occasionally succumbed to the temptation to worship literal graven images as idols, I argue that the more metaphorical sense of idolatry in which we worship our own success, wealth, and accomplishment was also a temptation for the ancient Israelites. I claim that the texts examined herein, particularly those from Deuteronomy, show that the commandments the Israelites were given, such as those regarding the Sabbatical year, were also designed to help them remember that the Lord had redeemed them and was the source of all they had. In remembering their redemption, they avoid the idolatry of thinking of themselves as the source of their success. I also argue that the command to have no other gods before God focused the Israelites on the need to remember the Lord rather than solely warning them against worshipping others gods or idols. By giving this command to remember the Lord and his goodness in redeeming them, the Lord was giving Israel a way to avoid the pride and idolatry of trusting in their own resources.<sup>2</sup>

The foundational connection between remembering redemption and avoiding idolatry is shown in the Ten Commandments in Exodus but is also reinforced in Deuteronomy. The house of Israel is warned that even in the abundance they have received, they should not “forget the Lord, which brought [them] forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage” nor should they “go after other gods” (Deuteronomy 6:12, 14). We can see the more metaphorical sense of idolatry in Deuteronomy 8 where the danger is explicated for the Israelites and that in forgetting the redemption, they will say “my power and the might of *mine* hand hath gotten me this wealth” (8:17; emphasis added). They are warned that in forgetting the Lord they will “walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them,” a warning that certainly became literal at times but one that can also

be understood more metaphorically as putting their trust in their material resources and their own power (8:19).

The Lord's redemption of the children of Israel from their bondage in Egypt came in fulfillment of his covenant with the patriarchs and also served as the foundation of his covenant relationship with all Israel as established in the law of Moses.<sup>3</sup> The warnings to remember this redemption can be found throughout the Pentateuch—the five books of Moses—and in this paper I will seek to show how remembering redemption is consistently connected to framing how the Israelites are to think about their own wealth and how they are to relate to those in need. Remembering that they were redeemed from Egypt would help them remember that all that they have should be understood as a stewardship and a gift and thus should help them be more willing to share these resources.<sup>4</sup>

While seeking to closely examine these Old Testament texts to more fully understand their doctrinal connections, I primarily focus not on the historical experience of the children of Israel but on what we as Latter-day Israel can learn from these biblical teachings. Studying the Lord Jehovah's covenant and commandments and the passages about his goodness in redeeming Israel from their bondage helps Israel to always remember him and foster a strong relationship with him. As we study biblical Israel's experiences with Jehovah, the premortal Christ, we can gain deeper insights into our own covenant relationship with the Lord as we remember all that we have is because of the price he paid for our redemption.

I have developed five subsections in order to clearly delineate my argument. First, I argue that the house of Israel is repeatedly taught that covenant blessings are the foundation of their abundance, and I explore how Israel was warned, particularly in Deuteronomy, not to think that they personally are the source of their wealth and prosperity. I then show how covenant requirements, especially those described in Deuteronomy 15 regarding the Sabbatical year, were set to remind Israel that the land they owned and the wealth they had built ultimately belonged to God, and thus they needed to share

their resources. Next, I explore biblical insights into the greatness of God and posit that these Old Testament texts show us how pride and idolatry can come from forgetting God's greatness and that all things come from him. Finally, I conclude by considering that when we remember God's greatness and our dependence on him, we are blessed with wealth—both temporal and spiritual—and can then use it to bless others.

## **Covenant Blessings as the Foundation of Abundance**

The first of the Ten Commandments, to have no other gods before God, is so familiar to us that we may not think it needs much comment. But by recognizing the role of covenant and redemption in the way the Lord frames this command, we can see how closely tied this is to his expectations regarding care for the poor. The first commandment begins with a statement of God's relationship to the children of Israel: "I am the Lord thy God" (Exodus 20:2). This "may be taken as a summary of the 'covenant formula' ('I will be your God, and you shall be my people')."<sup>5</sup> David L. Baker, a biblical scholar, notes that "this short phrase is particularly characteristic of the Holiness Code (Lev. 18–26) and is used in several laws on wealth and poverty. It often concludes laws on matters that cannot be judged or punished by human courts, because they are not objectively measurable, such as generosity or oppression."<sup>6</sup>

After Exodus 20:2 presents the Lord's role as Israel's God, the rest of the verse acts as a preamble to the command to have no other gods before Jehovah and is likewise foundational in establishing the true relationship of Israel to all that it has and is. The Lord explains, "I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" before commanding, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2–3). The connection between remembering redemption and avoiding idolatry in this passage is not an idle saying but is rather the explanation for how the

covenant people are to see their lives and all that they have.<sup>7</sup> Every other commandment, including those in the Ten Commandments and throughout the law of Moses, is grounded in this relationship. Particularly regarding commands that involve how to care for vulnerable people, the Israelites are reminded of their redemption, their true condition as stewards, and how they had been given all they needed to succeed and find wealth.

Striking restatements of this connection between remembering redemption and avoiding idolatry are found in Deuteronomy where the theological ground for the commandments is more fully developed. In these passages, Israel is given explanation for the command that there be a regular pattern of resetting economic relations. These commands for the seventh year are first found in Exodus 23, where the initial focus is caring for the poor: “And six years thou shalt sow thy land, and shalt gather in the fruits thereof; but the seventh year thou shalt let it rest and lie still; that the poor of thy people may eat” (23:10–11). Requirements for observing the Sabbatical year include forgiving debt and releasing those who had been serving in temporary debt servitude—an economic restructuring that would have been painful for those who had to give up what they felt was owed them and what they felt they owned. However, these commands had the potential to reverse systemic injustice and the perpetuation of a wealth divide that could never be closed.

Framing these covenant obligations to be generous and care for the poor is a stark reminder for the children of Israel that what they have is not their own. They are warned not to think that they are the source of their wealth and prosperity. In Deuteronomy 6 we find the Shema, *the* command that is to be ever present for the covenant people:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart:

And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes.

And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates. (6:4–9)

And then, directly following the great commandment of the covenant, the command to “love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deuteronomy 6:5), the Israelites are then warned about the danger of a metaphorical idolatry. They are warned not to think that all God has given them is theirs, not to love their possessions, and not to forget God.

In this warning about potentially setting their confidence in their wealth, they are told to remember their redemption: “When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, *take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*” (Deuteronomy 6:10–12 NRSV; emphasis added).<sup>8</sup> The abundance that they will experience in the promised land carries with it a tremendous danger of pride and forgetfulness. Forgetting God is a kind of idolatry that is seen in the false worship of their “own” accomplishments. It is a feeling that all they have received comes from their own strength and wisdom, forgetting that it is an unearned gift.

Directly after this warning, the first commandment in the Ten Commandments is essentially repeated again: “Thou shalt fear the

Lord thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name. Ye shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the people which are round about you” (Deuteronomy 6:13–14 KJV). Since we know about the history of the Israelites’ practice of worshipping the gods of the Canaanites, we may neglect to see the implicit metaphorical idolatry in their attitude toward material possessions and abundance as their “own” rather than as their stewardship and gift. They were being taught that how they treat and use what they have been given is how to show their love for the Lord.

As the covenant people today we must also remember and be able to explain that our obedience to commands, including the command to care for the poor, is rooted in our redemption: “And when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, which the Lord our God hath commanded you? Then thou shalt say unto thy son, We were Pharaoh’s bondmen in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand: . . . and he brought us out from thence, that he might bring us in, to give us the land which he sware unto our fathers” (Deuteronomy 6:20–21, 23 KJV; emphasis added). Everything that we are asked to do and everything that we are given must be understood in terms of the gift of Christ’s spiritual redemption, of which the redemption of Israel from Egypt was a type.<sup>9</sup>

In Deuteronomy 8 this reminder to remember redemption as a way to have a right relationship with wealth is restated but with a subtle nuance. Rather than emphasizing everything that Israel was given whole cloth, without their own effort as explained in chapter 6, chapter 8 includes a warning that even when their efforts are part of their success, they must not forget the One who provided all the conditions needed for that success.<sup>10</sup>

The language of this warning again connects remembering redemption with avoiding idolatry. The Israelites are told to remember that the Lord brought them out of Egypt so that they “do not exalt [themselves]” and metaphorically worship their own wealth.

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live[d] in them,

and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied,

then do not exalt yourself, *forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. . . .*

Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.”

But *remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth*, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. (Deuteronomy 8:12–14, 17–18 NRSV; emphasis added)<sup>11</sup>

Directly after this reminder that the power to get wealth comes from God, we find a reminder of the first commandment: “And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the Lord thy God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish” (Deuteronomy 8:19 KJV). Again, I believe that this commandment against idolatry should be understood directly in relationship to how the covenant people see their wealth, as was discussed previously. While the Old Testament writers might not write about this commandment in explicit terms of idolatry, I think that is what we are implicitly seeing in these texts: remembering redemption allows one to have a right relationship with God and to not move into metaphorical (or literal) idolatry—putting anything in the place of God. This is reinforced in some manuscripts that link Deuteronomy 8:19–20 with verses 1–18, implying that “turning to other gods is an inevitable result of forgetting ones’ dependence on God.”<sup>12</sup> These texts emphasize that the covenant blessings the children of Israel have received, including redemption, should bring a recognition of complete dependence on God for all good things that they have received and all that they have accomplished.



This clear Deuteronomic theology regarding Israel's complete dependence on God is part of the concept of the greatness of God in the Old Testament that I will explore in a later section. The biblical demand that the covenant people remember God's greatness was a way for the children of Israel to avoid the idolatry of boasting of and worshipping their own achievements, which could lead them to ignore the needs of others. This insight could be restated as the need to remember the greatness of God and one's own nothingness. The exact expression of human nothingness in contrast to God's greatness is not found in the Old Testament but is in a Book of Mormon quote from King Benjamin (Mosiah 4:5, 11). I believe that King Benjamin's speech perfectly captures the biblical concept of the complete dependence that the covenant people should have on God.

## **Covenant Requirements for "No Poor among Them"**

In Deuteronomy 15, the covenant requirements to care for the poor are directly connected with recognizing one's dependence on God's mercy and his covenant faithfulness. The regulations for the seventh-year remission of debts and the release of Israelites serving in temporary enslavement in Deuteronomy 15 had the potential to function as a structural reminder that what the wealthy perceived as their resources was not actually theirs. In this chapter, the recognition that it is not their land or their wealth is tied to there being "no poor among them" (15:4). This phrase should be particularly evocative for Latter-day Saints because this condition of having "no poor among them" is specified as a condition for establishing Zion: "And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them" (Moses 7:18).

Of course, there clearly were poor people among the Israelites, but Deuteronomy 15 provides a connection between recognizing that Israel's land was given by God and how the Israelites should treat

those in need. The phrase “no poor among them” can give us important insights into the kind of society that we are to build. In the King James translation, however, having “no poor among them” is merely a theoretical possibility: “Save when there shall be no poor among you” (15:4). Other translations of Deuteronomy 15:4–5 provide much more helpful insights about having “no poor among them.” The phrase could be seen as a moral imperative: “However, there *should not be any poor among you*, for the LORD will surely bless you in the land that he is giving you as an inheritance, if you carefully obey him by keeping all these commandments that I am giving you today” (NET Bible; emphasis added). The phrase can also be seen as a covenant promise: “There *shall be no needy among you*—since the Lord your God will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion—if only you heed the Lord your God and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day” (JSB; emphasis added).

When we trust that this is the kind of society the Lord wants us to establish as his covenant people, then we can seek to learn from the mechanisms of wealth redistribution that the Lord established in the Law of Moses, and we can also learn about the internal attitude that he commanded his people to have regarding material abundance. The goal here is to understand the theological underpinnings for these commands concerning the Sabbatical year instead of exploring what we can say about their practical effects in the history of Israel. We do not live under the law of Moses, but our latter-day covenant relationship with the Lord also has expectations about how we should use and feel about the material resources at our disposal.

The first command about the Sabbatical year in Deuteronomy 15 was debt release: “This is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit his claim, on whatever he has lent to his neighbor; he shall not exact it from his neighbor or his brother, for a remission to the Lord has been proclaimed” (15:2 Baker translation).<sup>13</sup> We might think that debt release is a lateral rather than a vertical action—meaning that it is about the relationship between people and not

between people and God. But there is an important clue in the phrase “a remission to the Lord.” This translation by Baker brings out the literal sense of “a remission to the Lord” and shows “its correspondence with ‘sabbath to the Lord’” (Exodus 20:10 Baker translation). In the Ten Commandments the explanation that the “seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord” (Exodus 20:10 NIV) shows the emphasis for Sabbath day observance is to show the Lord how we remember him.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, saying that debt release in the Sabbatical year is a “remission to the Lord” would emphasize that we are showing the Lord how we remember him by forgiving the debts others owe us. This concept reemphasizes that Old Testament law is not primarily economic or political but that “its underlying goal is maintenance of the covenant relationship between the people and their God.”<sup>15</sup> Forgiving any outstanding debts during the seventh year was a way of showing the Lord that they remembered his mercy and generosity for them.<sup>16</sup> This Old Testament vision is captured in King Benjamin’s explanation that “when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17).

The text also reemphasizes the need to be generous and lend to those in need, even if this loan might come shortly before the Sabbatical year when the debt would be canceled (see Deuteronomy 15:9). Not worrying about repayment goes against normal human reasoning, but this passage asks for behavior that goes against a limited view of self-interest: “If a fellow Israelite from one of your villages in the land that the Lord your God is giving you should be poor, you must not harden your heart or be insensitive to his impoverished condition. Instead, you must be sure to open your hand to him and generously lend him whatever he needs” (Deuteronomy 15:7–8; NET). Remembering that the land has been given by God should change the way we see the needs of the poor, and remembering God’s generosity to us can help us be willing to be generous to others.

In addition to the normal human hesitancy to share, the text helps us understand that the timing of the Sabbatical can potentially make it harder to offer a loan to those in need. The lender is told to

check a fearful hesitation to help those in need by having the right heart: “Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the Lord against thee, and it be sin unto thee. Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the Lord thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto” (Deuteronomy 15:9–10 KJV). The Lord promises that when we are willing to sacrifice for others, our generosity will be met with blessings in everything we do, and we also avoid our stinginess being counted against us as sin.<sup>17</sup> Here again, financial generosity given “without a grudging heart” expresses trust in God as the source of abundance, and “because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you attempt” (15:10 NIV).

The next wealth distribution provision tied to the Sabbatical year is the command to release the Hebrews who were enslaved. Those who had been enriched by the free labor of these enslaved laborers were not just to release them without compensation: “Thou shalt not let him go away empty,” rather “thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of thy winepress: *of that wherewith the Lord thy God hath blessed thee* thou shalt give unto him” (15:13–14 KJV; emphasis added). Note the reminder here that it is with the abundance with which they have been blessed by God that they, in turn, were to bless others.

In the next verse this action to free those who were enslaved is tied to their remembering that “you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today” (15:15 NIV). The covenant expectation that we remember our captivity and our redemption helps us transcend our selfishness by pushing us to always remember our dependence on God’s mercy and generosity. This expectation also helps us to act with similar mercy to others, even when helping to improve others’ lives comes at the cost of an immediate sacrifice to our own way of life. As with the

command to loan even when it would not be repaid, the Lord promises that he will make up the difference when he asks the Israelites to release people who were temporarily enslaved. He reminds his people that blessings will come from the sacrifice involved: “It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you, for at half the cost of a hired worker he has served you six years. So the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do” (15:18 ESV). The loss in capital need not “seem hard” when the children of Israel remember their abundance and trust that they will be further blessed for acting to free their fellow Israelites.

In summary, with the commands in Deuteronomy 15 for the seventh-year remission of debts and freeing of the Israelites who were enslaved, the covenant people are asked to remember that what they have has been given is from God and that they need to trust that their abundance comes from God. This command invites a perspective of humility toward and trust in God into our financial relationships with others. This perspective is both an expression of gratitude for the redemption that allowed us to be in this covenant relationship, and it is an expression of trust in the blessings promised to us because of our covenant relationship with the Lord. We remember our redemption as we choose to obey the Lord’s will in how we use our resources.

This perspective of humility and trust is essential because each of the commands in Deuteronomy 15 that are associated with the Sabbatical year were ways to redistribute wealth and prevent a perpetually widening gap between the rich and the poor. While we do not have these specific commands today, the Lord has shown his intention for there to be a covenant society in which there are no poor or needy among us. In our day the application of the command to “open your hand wide” (Deuteronomy 15:8 NKJV) may come through personal spiritual impressions, but as we remember our redemption we will be increasingly willing to follow impressions to give up that which we might naturally see as ours.

As we also seek to remember our redemption and that what we have is not our own, we can find our own ways to follow the Old Testament model of giving up repayment of a loan or labor to which one has become accustomed. This deepening of conversion, a change of heart about our possessions, allows us to more fully live out our covenant of consecration. By asking people to regularly and voluntarily renounce claims to their wealth, the Lord provides the opportunity for people to remember their redemption and that everything they have comes from him. Using King Benjamin's words that so beautifully summarize this Old Testament theology, we must remember "the greatness of God, and [our] own nothingness" (Mosiah 4:11). Therefore, remembering God's greatness is, by definition, remembering one's own nothingness and the dependence on God for all that one has and is able to do.

## Greatness of God

The Old Testament theology of the greatness of God shows how we should see ourselves in relation to God. Having this right relationship with God is needed to overcome barriers to caring for the poor and needy. The Hebrew root *g-d-l* communicates the idea of greatness, prominence, and importance. This can have both positive and negative connotations. This verb is used when God's greatness is praised, but it is also used in the verbal form *hitpatel*, meaning "to become arrogant or magnify oneself," which could imply that one is magnifying oneself over God.<sup>18</sup> The noun form *gedûllâ* "denotes the great acts of God," and the verb *gōdel*, in seven of its thirteen biblical uses, "refer[s] to the greatness of God, especially the greatness of God in redeeming his people from bondage in Egypt."<sup>19</sup> "In reference to humankind," however, "*gōdel* is used negatively to denote human arrogance."<sup>20</sup>

In Deuteronomy we see several passages explaining that God wants to show his people his greatness. "O Lord God, thou hast begun to shew thy servant thy greatness, and thy mighty hand: for what God is there in heaven or in earth, that can do according to

thy works, and according to thy might?" (Deuteronomy 3:24 KJV). The Lord is without comparison for his works and his might, and he reveals his glory and greatness through the prophets and the temple. "And ye said, Behold, the Lord our God hath shewed us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire: we have seen this day that God doth talk with man, and he liveth" (5:24).

God's "greatness, his mighty hand, and his stretched out arm" are particularly seen in "his miracles, and his acts, which he did in the midst of Egypt unto Pharaoh the king of Egypt, and unto all his land; And what he did unto the army of Egypt, unto their horses, and to their chariots; how he made the water of the Red sea to overflow them as they pursued after you, and how the Lord hath destroyed them unto this day; And what he did unto you in the wilderness, until ye came into this place" (Deuteronomy 11:2–5). Remembering their redemption would be critical to remembering the greatness of God and their own nothingness—that is, their own dependence on God for all that they have and are and, after remembering this, to then give of what they have to those in need (see Mosiah 2:20–22; 4:21–23).

God's greatness in giving not only obliges us to give, since what we have is his and not our own, but also models how we should give. A striking passage in Psalm 145 shows how God gives in a way that he asks us to follow. First we read of God's greatness: "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; and his greatness is unsearchable" (145:3). The psalmist reminds us that God is not only great but also good and merciful: "The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works" (145:9). Note the language with which the psalmist praises God's generosity: "Thou openest thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing" (145:16). This is exactly how the covenant people are asked to give: "If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother: But *thou shalt open thine hand wide unto*

*him*, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth” (Deuteronomy 15:7–8; emphasis added). As we choose to not harden our hearts or shut our hand from our poor sisters and brothers, we develop hearts like the Lord’s.

Fully appreciating the greatness of God and our own nothingness allows us to recognize that everything we have is really God’s and not our own. Knowing the greatness of God opens us up to see ourselves and others in a truer light, realize that riches come from God, and understand that we are instruments in God’s hand to use his resources to bless others and further his work. As we remember the greatness of God and act accordingly, we move toward living out the principle that there should be “no poor among them” in Zion. If, however, we forget that our abundance is a gift from God, the very attitude of arrogantly thinking that our greatness is the source of our wealth is idolatry.

## **Danger of Forgetting God’s Greatness**

The psalmist speaks very directly about the danger of pride and idolatry: “If riches increase, set not your heart upon them” (Psalm 62:10).<sup>21</sup> An illustration of how prosperity can lead to turning against God and betraying Israel’s covenant relationship can be found in the experience of the Israelites as recounted in Deuteronomy 32.<sup>22</sup> In this poetic text, Israel is asked to “remember the days of old” when the children of Israel had been led and fed in the wilderness (32:7). “For the Lord’s portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: So the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him” (32:9–12).

So far, we see Israel’s dependence on God highlighted because they were found “in a desert land, and in the waste howling



wilderness” (Deuteronomy 32:10). Thus, as a child is nurtured by and dependent on parents, the children of Israel were borne on eagle wings, fed, and led by Jehovah, their covenant father. But rather than recognizing their dependence on God as the covenant parent, we see that when Israel prospered (growing “fat”) it rejected God: “Jeshurun [here meaning Israel] waxed fat, and kicked: thou art waxen fat, thou art grown thick, thou art covered with fatness; then he forsook God which made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation,” turning away to other gods (32:15). This was a betrayal of the divine source of all they had received: “Of the Rock that begat thee thou art unmindful, and hast forgotten God that formed thee” (32:18).

Just as literal idolatry is a betrayal of God, setting our hearts upon other “gods”—like riches, especially in times of prosperity—is also a betrayal. As Psalm 62:10 warns, “If riches increase, set not your heart upon them.” Growing “fat” in prosperity can lead to transferring our heart away from “lov[ing] the Lord [our] God” as we should, “with all [our] heart, and with all [our] soul, and with all [our] might,” thus leading us to become idolatrous and betray the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Modern-day prophets have also warned that setting our hearts upon riches is idolatry. President Spencer W. Kimball clearly taught that our god is in whatever we put our trust. His teachings directly follow the Old Testament connection between setting our heart on riches and betraying our covenant responsibilities to the Lord and his children. President Kimball explained,

Few [people] have ever knowingly and deliberately chosen to reject God and his blessings. Rather, we learn from the scriptures that because the exercise of faith has always appeared to be more difficult than relying on things more immediately at hand, carnal [people have] tended to transfer [their] trust in God to material things. Therefore, in all ages when [people] have fallen under the power of Satan and lost the faith, they have put in its place a hope in the “arm of flesh” and in “gods

of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know" (Dan. 5:23)—that is, in idols. This I find to be a dominant theme in the Old Testament. Whatever thing [people set their] heart and [their] trust in most is [their] god; and if [their] god doesn't also happen to be the true and living God of Israel, [those people are] laboring in idolatry.<sup>23</sup>

This misplacement of our hearts and our trust is identical to the problem laid out in Psalm 10: "The wicked in his pride doth persecute the poor: let them be taken in the devices that they have imagined. For the wicked boasteth of his heart's desire, and blesseth the covetous, whom the Lord abhorreth. The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts" (Psalm 10:2–4). By focusing on what we have and putting our trust in that, our relationship with God is corrupted and we can "persecute the poor" by withholding our hand from helping them in their need. By not really knowing the greatness of God, we boast of our "heart's desire, and [bless] the covetous" rather than those in need.

## Remembering God's Greatness and Blessing Others

The Old Testament shows us the dangers of loving and trusting our wealth more than we love and trust God, but it also shows us a way out, a way to remember God by using what we have to bless others. Over and over again the children of Israel are told to remember their captivity and the gift of redemption provided by the Lord. Remembering their redemption and that the promised land and all its abundance were their gifts and their stewardship could provide his people with the spiritual grounding to have wealth and to use it the right way. Similarly, remembering God's greatness and our dependence on him can allow us to use our wealth to bless others.

The Lord knew how dangerous comfort and abundance would be for his covenant people, so he put the first commandment first.

Old Testament scholar Robin Wakely insightfully observes that “for Israelites, the antidote to the complacency induced by careless amnesia, which is tantamount to disobedience, is faithful remembrance. . . . They must always remember that it is Yahweh who empowers them to gain wealth, and they must never arrogantly boast that they have acquired their own riches . . . entirely through their own efforts (Deut. 8:17–18).”<sup>24</sup> Always remembering our spiritual captivity and our redemption can help us keep both the first and the second commandments. Our love for the Lord, which grows out of our recognition of our complete dependence on his mercy and grace, helps us remember that our riches come from God and that it is our covenant responsibility to “open [our] hand wide” as God opens his hand to us (see Psalm 145:16). When we remember our nothingness and God’s greatness, we will use our abundance to bless others and establish Zion with “no poor among us.”

We catch a glimpse of this right heart when riches are used to build the kingdom of God. In the sublime words of a repentant King David dedicating land and supplies for the building of the temple at the end of his life, he says, “Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honour come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. Now therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name” (1 Chronicles 29:11–13). Remembering God’s greatness is recognizing that all we have comes from him. He is the one who can “make great” and give “power and might” to get abundance.

Along with recognizing God’s greatness, in Chronicles we also see what it looks like to remember our own nothingness: “But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee. For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there

is none abiding. O Lord our God, all this store that we have prepared to build thee an house for thine holy name cometh of thine hand, and is all thine own" (1 Chronicles 29:14–16). We must remember we are strangers and sojourners before God, as were all our ancestors—all of our wealth comes from God's hand. Remembering our redemption means remembering that all we have comes from God and that it really is his, not ours. This keeps us in the right relationship with God—as his humble servants and stewards, seeking to know his will about how he would have us use the gifts and abundance that we have been given to bless others.

Like David, we likewise raise our voices: "We give thee but thine own / Whate'er the gift may be / For all we have is thine alone, / A trust, O Lord, from thee."<sup>25</sup> But to be willing to consecrate our lives and use our resources to bless others as God would have us do, we have to not just sing the words. We must feel this dependence and gratitude both deeply and daily, but it is so easy to forget. In the words of this hymn: "May we thy bounties thus / As stewards true receive, / And gladly, as thou blessest us, / To thee our first-fruits give / To comfort and to bless, / To find a balm for woe, / To tend the lone and fatherless / Is angels' work below." The Old Testament theology of abundance asks us as the Lord's servants to recognize that we are stewards of what we have and that we are required to use what we have been entrusted with "to comfort and to bless, to find a balm for woe, [and] to tend the lone and fatherless."

## Conclusion

The prophetic voice that echoes through the Old Testament to see ourselves and our resources in the proper light is not absent in our day. We are reminded that "the Lord has blessed us as a people with a prosperity unequalled in times past. The resources that have been placed in our power are good, and necessary to our work here on the earth."<sup>26</sup> But President Kimball said that he was "afraid that many of us have been surfeited with flocks and herds and acres and barns and

wealth and have begun to worship them as false gods, and they have [begun to have] power over us.” This idolatry comes when we set our hearts on our riches.

By loving our riches more than God, we give them power over us that leads us to hesitate to open our hand wide to those who are poor. We hesitate when our generosity might impinge on our own personal comfort. We hesitate when we feel we are entitled to more than others because of our hard work and diligence. We hesitate when we fear that we will lose our security. President Kimball wondered, “Do we have more of these good things than our faith can stand? Many people spend most of their time working in the service of a self-image that includes sufficient money, stocks, bonds, investment portfolios, property, credit cards, furnishings, automobiles, and the like to *guarantee* carnal security throughout, it is hoped, a long and happy life.”<sup>27</sup> Like the command in Deuteronomy 15 to reduce financial security by lending even when it would not be repaid or limiting the benefits that we can get from other people’s labor, there are times when God asks us to give to others and trust that he will be the source of our abundance and security. The need to trust in God rather than in our riches may be asked of us in sacrifices like a formal call to serve, but often the sacrifices we are asked to make come through quiet promptings to our heart.

President Kimball specifies that as the covenant people, “our assignment is to use these many resources in our families and quorums to build up the kingdom of God—to further the missionary effort and the genealogical and temple work; to raise our children up as fruitful servants unto the Lord; to bless others in every way, that they may also be fruitful.”<sup>28</sup> Living to help others find both spiritual and temporal well-being is living to “bless others in every way, that they may also be fruitful.” A covenant perspective on wealth is a virtuous cycle in which all consecrated efforts are compounded as those we bless become more fruitful in blessing others.

Our covenant obedience to the first commandment—to love God first and not have wealth become an idol—prepares us to more

fully live out the second commandment to love our neighbor. Seeking to “bless others in every way, that they may also be fruitful” is our stewardship. We are asked to care for the poor and needy in such a way that we do it “unto the Lord” so that we have nothing to boast of ourselves. If done as an expression of stewardship and gratitude for our own redemption, our service becomes a way of always remembering the greatness of God in our redemption.

By asking us to use our material blessings to focus on the needs of other people and to prioritize helping them over our own sense of what we own and what we are owed, we are kept safe from the danger that President Kimball explicitly warned about: “Expend[ing] these blessings on our own desires, and as Moroni said, ‘[adorning] yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer[ing] the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick and the afflicted to pass by you, [but noticing] them not’ (Morm. 8:39).”<sup>29</sup> Making the needs of others more important to us than “that which hath no life” is the means by which we avoid making our possessions our gods. Choosing to notice the hungry, needy, naked, sick, and afflicted and then not letting them pass by us keeps us from forgetting our redemption.

Blessing others through positive action keeps us alive to an embodied memory of God’s blessings to us. President Russell M. Nelson explained that “*living* that second great commandment is the *key* to becoming a true disciple of Jesus Christ.”<sup>30</sup> We always remember God when we *live out* the right relationship with the abundance he has given us (see Doctrine and Covenants 104:18). We always remember him when we do not turn away in the face of the poor but instead share what we have been given. All that we have and all that we are is a gift, but it is in how we *use* what we have been given that we always remember him.

We can avoid the danger of “walk[ing] in [our] own way, and after the image of [our] own God, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and *whose substance is that of an idol*” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:16; emphasis added). We can avoid the pride of focusing on our own strength or the idolatry of trusting in our “own” resources by

remembering our redemption and our Redeemer. Our remembering will be shown, as President Nelson said, in “a conscientious effort to care about others as much as or more than we care about ourselves . . . especially when it is not convenient and when it takes us out of our comfort zone.”<sup>31</sup> The building of Zion and our own spiritual safety demand that we learn from the Old Testament that the Lord is the source of all that we have. As we remember his mercy and power in redeeming us, we will have a spirit of consecration with all that we have been given. We will truly remember our redemption as we “open our hand wide” to those in need and work toward there being “no poor among us.”

## Notes

1. While we consistently use the term *idolatry* in a more general or metaphorical sense in the modern world, in an ancient setting, worship of physical idols also took place. In ancient Israel and in the surrounding cultures, representations of other gods existed as physical idols, and the Israelites were commanded to not worship them nor to bow down and serve them. Rather, they were commanded to worship Jehovah, the God with whom they had covenanted to serve and remember.
2. Many Book of Mormon prophets teach of the biblical connections between pride and idolatry, and their teachings exhibit their deep reflection on these biblical messages. For example, Jacob warns against “pride; and those of you which have afflicted your neighbor, and persecuted him because ye were proud in your hearts, of the things which God hath given you” (Jacob 2:20); King Benjamin exhorts us to “remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God,” which will lead to a desire to “impart of the substance ye have one to another” (Mosiah 4:11, 21); Abinadi: “If ye teach the law of Moses why do ye not keep it? Why do ye set your hearts upon riches?” (Mosiah 12:29).
3. Deuteronomy 7:7–8; 1 Nephi 17:40; see Jennifer C. Lane, “The Lord Will Redeem His People: Adoptive Covenant and Redemption in the Old Testament,” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul

- Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 298–310.
4. While they are given their freedom and the land as part of redemption, both the land and the people of Israel belong to the Lord. See Leviticus 25:23, 42; 1 Corinthians 6:19–20.
  5. David L. Baker, “Why Care for the Poor? Theological Foundations of Old Testament Laws of Wealth and Poverty,” *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 29 (2006): 9.
  6. Baker, “Why Care for the Poor?,” 9. Examples of these laws include: generosity at harvest time (Leviticus 19:9–10), “legal equality between resident aliens and native-born Israelites” (24:22), “honesty in buying and selling” (25:13–17), “granting freedom to bonded labourers [sic] in the jubilee year (Lev. 25:54–55).” Baker, “Why Care for the Poor?,” 10.
  7. In the Old Testament, covenant Israel was told to look back to the redemption from Egypt to remember their relationship with the Lord. We see in the Book of Mormon, New Testament, and modern-day revelations that those who understand the spiritual redemption made by the Lord Jesus Christ, of which the redemption from Egypt was a type, have even more reason to be eternally grateful and to worship God alone and have no other gods before him.
  8. Jeffrey H. Tigay notes: “This reminder that the Israelites did not create the material wealth they are about to possess is an implicit warning against the attitude of self-sufficiency that prosperity can induce.” Further, “The idea that material wealth and satiety can lead to pride and arrogance and forgetting one’s dependence on God is a persistent concern in the Bible. It is repeated several times in Deuteronomy (8:12–14; 11:14–16; 31:20; 32:15) and elsewhere. Proverbs 30:8–9 sums up this concern as follows: ‘Give me neither poverty nor riches, but provide me with my daily bread, lest, being sated, I renounce, saying, ‘Who is the Lord?’ The Talmud quotes a popular proverb to similar effect: ‘Filled stomachs are a type of evil.’” Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 80.
  9. In Deuteronomy 7:7–8, lest the people become boastful in their being redeemed, they are reminded of the covenant basis for redemption: “The



Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

10. “The idea as expressed here is reflected in Hos. 8:14 ‘Israel has forgotten his maker and built temples and Judah multiplied fortified cities.’” Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, Anchor Bible Series 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 394.
11. In Deuteronomy 8:13, “the same Hebrew verb, *r-b-h*, is used in all three cases [to describe Israel’s possessions growing: *multiplied, increased, prospered*]. It is the leitmotif of chapters 7–8. . . . Although the increase of Israel’s cattle and wealth, like the building of houses (v. 12), will naturally require effort on its part, Moses does not say ‘and you have multiplied your herds and flocks,’ but rather ‘your herds and flocks have multiplied.’ In this way he avoids giving the impression that this increase will be due to Israel’s own activity.” Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 95. Joel S. Kaminsky observes, “Once Israel was secure in the land, God’s daily activities of sustenance were in the background and less easily noticed than in the wilderness period. As Deuteronomy 8 notes, God’s gift of strength to the Israelites to enable them to build wealth can create the mistaken impression that they are a self-made people.” Joel S. Kaminsky, “‘The Might of Mine Own Hand Has Gotten Me This Wealth’: Reflections on Wealth and Poverty in the Hebrew Bible and Today,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 73, no. 1 (2019): 9.
12. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 96.
13. Baker, “Why Care for the Poor?,” 12.
14. Baker, “Why Care for the Poor?,” 12.
15. Baker, “Why Care for the Poor?,” 12.
16. In the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21–35, we see the Savior’s message that forgiving others, including sacrificing getting back what we feel is owed us, is required to always remember the infinite forgiveness of debt that we have been given because of Christ.

17. See a beautiful discussion of this in Kaminsky, “The Might of Mine Own Hand,” 11. He comments, “In one sense, blessing begets blessing, and curse begets curse.”
18. Martin G. Abegg, “*gdl*,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 1:824.
19. Numbers 14:19; Deuteronomy 3:24[21]; 5:24; 9:26; 11:2; 32:3. Abegg, “*gdl*,” 826.
20. Abegg, “*gdl*,” 827. “The northern kingdom of Israel rejected God’s word, claiming that they could rebuild and be stronger than before (Isa 9:9[8]). Assyria (10:12; Ezek 31:7), as well as Egypt are accountable for their own (Ezek 31:2) ‘greatness’ before God.” Abegg, “*gdl*,” 827.
21. “Wealth is a gift of God (Deuteronomy 8:17–18; cf. Num 31:9; Isaiah 61:6). However, the Israelites are warned of its potential dangers. It is wrong to set one’s heart on riches, for true security is provided by God alone (Ps 62:10[11]).” Robin Wakely, “*hayil*,” in *New International Dictionary*, 2:123.
22. Tigay notes that in this summary of blessings, “Israel should consider its history in order to be reminded of all that God did for it.” Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 302.
23. Spencer W. Kimball, “The False Gods We Worship,” *Ensign*, June 1976, 4.
24. Wakely, “*hayil*,” 123–24.
25. William Walsham How, “We Give Thee but Thine Own,” in *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 218.
26. Kimball, “False Gods We Worship,” 4.
27. Kimball, “False Gods We Worship,” 4; emphasis in original.
28. Kimball, “False Gods We Worship,” 4.
29. Kimball, “False Gods We Worship,” 4–5.
30. Russell M. Nelson, “The Second Great Commandment,” *Ensign*, November 2019, 100; emphasis in original.
31. Nelson, “Second Great Commandment,” 100.