

The Strait and Narrow Path: The Covenant Path of Discipleship Leading to the Tree of Life

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The visions and interpretations of the tree of life constitute some of the greatest didactic, or teaching, chapters in the Book of Mormon. The symbols and images in these chapters inspire us to reflect and ponder the rich messages that lie behind the tree of life's meaning. The theme and timing of this conference are appropriate, as over the last few years, there have been significant statements made by leaders of the Church in relation to the interpretation and application of the tree of life visions.¹ Much can be written about these visions, but this paper will focus on one central theme: the strait and narrow path as the covenant path of discipleship leading to the tree of life. What that means is simply this: God has prepared a way, a path, that can bring us, his children, back into his presence in a state of immortality. That way is through the Atonement of Christ and the covenantal system that he has set up (see Articles of Faith 1:3, 4). Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet state that in the vision of the tree of life, "partaking of the fruit of the tree . . . represent[s] the partaking of the powers of Christ and his atonement: forgiveness of sins, as well as feelings of peace, joy, and gratitude.

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Ultimately, through partaking of the powers of the gospel one is qualified to partake of the *greatest fruit* of the Atonement—the blessings associated with eternal life.”² Thus there is a difference between the immediate and future occurrences of partaking of the fruit associated with the covenantal nature inherent in the process. Elder Bruce R. McConkie elucidates the meaning of the final partaking of the fruit: “To eat thereof is to inherit eternal life in the kingdom of God.”³

Through the vision of the tree of life, we enter the world of symbolism underlying the necessary discipleship that leads to exaltation. If we carefully examine the vision, the pathway leading to the tree of life seems to reflect the covenant road (which leads to eternal salvation in God’s presence) rather than to describe the rough roads of life (where we are to do good and avoid temptations to the best of our ability). Thus, on the path of discipleship, “enduring to the end” has a greater covenantal significance. In discussing Lehi’s dream, it should be stated that the covenant path not only symbolizes ordinances and covenants but also represents the lifestyle of one who has entered, and continues to enter, into those ordinances and covenants with God throughout the course of life—one who moves forward on that path and attempts to stay faithful to the end of this mortal journey. The strait and narrow path and the iron rod are components of the dream that make obtaining the fruit of the tree possible. Elder Neal A. Maxwell described the path of discipleship in these terms:

Deeds, not words—and becoming, not describing—are dominant in true discipleship. Of necessity, of course, we are to teach and learn the doctrines. We would be spiritually stranded without them and, likewise, without the saving and exalting gospel ordinances, because ‘in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh’ (D&C 84:20–21). So it is that discipleship requires all of us to translate doctrines, covenants, ordinances, and teachings into improved personal behavior. Otherwise we may be doctrinally rich but end up developmentally poor. . . . The gospel’s rich and true doctrines combine to constitute a call to a new and more abundant life, but this is a lengthy process. It requires much time, experiencing the relevant learning experiences, the keeping of covenants, and the receiving of

the essential ordinances—all in order to spur us along the discipleship path of personal progression.⁴

The necessity of staying on the path of discipleship is highlighted in Lehi's dream as he witnesses individuals partake of the fruit of the tree and then fall away from the path. The people partaking of the fruit of the tree are a representation of individuals who had taken upon themselves all of the ordinances and covenants necessary to qualify for eternal life (thus receiving conditional blessings contingent upon obedience and enduring to the end). Because they fall away, these individuals do not witness the ultimate fulfillment of those blessings (receiving exaltation in the presence of God and entering into the rest of the Lord). President Joseph F. Smith highlighted the meaning of entering into the Lord's rest in both immediate and future contexts:

What does it mean to enter into the rest of the Lord? Speaking for myself, it means that through the love of God I have been won over to Him, so that I can feel at rest in Christ, that I may no more be disturbed by every wind of doctrine, by the cunning and craftiness of men, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; and that I am established in the knowledge and testimony of Jesus Christ, so that no power can turn me aside from the straight and narrow path that leads back into the presence of God, to enjoy exaltation in His glorious kingdom; that from this time henceforth I shall enjoy that rest until I shall *rest* with Him in the heavens.⁵

Lehi's vision teaches of fidelity to covenants—a topic applicable to all. As President Boyd K. Packer has taught, "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."⁶

An Overview of the Tree of Life: From Eden to Eternal Life

The tree of life motif permeated ancient societies, including Israel and Egypt.⁷ Sacred trees were associated with the dwelling place of deities, and, like the agricultural connections inherent in the motif of the sacred trees' power to rejuvenate each season, so also the tree became a symbol of resurrection after death, rebirth into immortality, and eternity (Representations of these concepts were often portrayed on sarcophagi and epithets).⁸ In connection with God's giving and sustaining of life, the tree of life is commonly

linked to rituals and cultic objects within temples. An example of this is the Menorah in the Israelite temple, which is frequently viewed as a stylized tree of life. The light that falls on the twelve loaves beneath the Menorah symbolizes God's power sustaining the twelve tribes of Israel (both temporally and spiritually).⁹ Rituals, and the keeping of the laws attached to them, enabled individuals to obtain the tree of life. The Jerusalem Targum on Genesis 2:9 states, "For the law is the tree of life; whoever keepeth it in this life liveth and subsisteth as the tree of life. The law is good to keep in this world, as the fruit of the tree of life in the world that cometh."¹⁰ The law required worship associated with the temple, and the law itself was originally housed in the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, thus highlighting its relevance to the temple and demonstrating its place in leading one back to God (the very symbol depicted in the architecture of the temple). New Testament writings, such as Revelation chapter 2, have also linked salvation with sacred ritual and the partaking of the fruit of the tree of life.¹¹ Furthermore, Reformation theologians including Calvin, Polanus, Wolleb, and Diodati viewed the tree of life as a type of eternal life, a sacrament that would extend immortality to the obedient through Jesus Christ.¹²

The tree of life image also abounds in other religious texts; the sacred nature of this symbolic depiction of eternal life is highlighted in the rituals that underlie temple worship in ancient societies. This literature of the tree of life reflects the fact that ritual is necessary to obtain the tree.¹³ Griggs summarizes a few Egyptian iconographic examples of this notion: "Many other Egyptian artifacts show divine beings refreshing the pharaohs with the fruit of the tree of life. A pond or stream of sacred water often lies near or under the tree, with the god of writing, Thoth, inscribing the name of the king on the tree. In all these examples, partaking of the fruit of the tree is a sacramental act, one that symbolizes unity with the gods; hence, the fruit is not available to mortals in the normal course of daily life but can be found only in the rituals relating to eternity."¹⁴ Ritual that would lead the worshipper, or devotee, into the presence of God or the eternities, portrayed by the means of a tree of life, was a concept fairly common in the region.¹⁵

In the scriptural record, the tree of life is first encountered in the Garden of Eden (see Moses 4:31; Genesis 3:22). There Adam and Eve enjoyed association with God, and the tree of life highlighted their immortal existence with him.¹⁶ Because of the Fall, Adam and Eve were cast out from his presence

and could no longer enjoy face-to-face communication with him. Adam and Eve lost access to the tree of life and the blessing of immortality; death would then enter their lives. Their subsequent mortality would become a preparatory state for their eventual return to immortality (the tree of life) and the presence of God (eternal life; see Moses 4:30–31).

In order for Adam and Eve and their posterity, who would inherit this condition of separation, to reenter God's presence, it was necessary to provide a way to overcome and reverse the effects of the Fall (see 2 Nephi 2:21). The gospel of Jesus Christ, which includes both covenants and ordinances, would constitute the path back to the tree of life, and thus the Atonement of Jesus Christ would become the mechanism to open up that way.¹⁷ Through the Atonement of Christ, the obstacles of sin and death could, and would, be removed for all individuals who would claim the Atonement's blessings (see Moses 7:1; D&C 19:16–19). Remembrance of the Atonement became a form of discipleship symbolically manifested in the worship system that required Adam and Eve to participate in "the plan of salvation unto all men, through the blood of mine Only Begotten, who shall come in the meridian of time" (Moses 6:62). Adam and Eve, and subsequently their posterity, offered sacrifices in similitude of the sacrifice of the Son of God (see Moses 5:7–8), were baptized and received the Holy Ghost (see Moses 6:65–66), and entered into the order of the priesthood (see Moses 6:67). All of this was done "by an holy ordinance, and the Gospel preached" (Moses 5:59). Consequently, the Lord commanded "that all men, everywhere, must repent, or they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God, for no unclean thing can dwell there, or dwell in his presence" (Moses 6:57). The Lord also taught them:

That by reason of transgression cometh the fall, which fall bringeth death, and inasmuch as ye were born into the world by water, and blood, and the spirit, which I have made, and so became of dust a living soul, even so ye must be born again into the kingdom of heaven, of water, and of the Spirit, and be cleansed by blood, even the blood of mine Only Begotten; that ye might be sanctified from all sin, and enjoy the words of eternal life in this world, and eternal life in the world to come, even immortal glory;

For by the water ye keep the commandment; by the Spirit ye are justified, and by the blood ye are sanctified. (Moses 6:59–60)¹⁸

The entire gospel plan given to Adam and Eve, and subsequently to all of us, constituted a path that would enable them to claim all of the blessings of the Atonement by allowing them to take upon themselves the candidacy of eternal life through ordinances. They would enjoy the consummation of those promises at the end of life if they endured to the end. As Elder McConkie stated:

Adam and Eve—our first parents, our common ancestors, the mother and father of all living—had the fulness of the everlasting gospel. They received the plan of salvation from God himself. . . . They saw God, knew his laws, entertained angels, received revelations, beheld visions, and were in tune with the Infinite. They exercised faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; repented of their sins; were baptized in similitude of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Promised Messiah; and received the gift of the Holy Ghost. They were endowed with power from on high, were sealed in the new and everlasting covenant of marriage, and received the fulness of the ordinances of the house of the Lord. . . .

Having charted for themselves a course leading to eternal life, they pressed forward with a steadfastness in Christ—believing, obeying, conforming, consecrating, sacrificing—until their calling and election was made sure and they were sealed up unto eternal life.¹⁹

From the time Adam and Eve were driven away from the tree of life and the presence of God, the covenant path was established to lead them back again to him in a renewed state of immortality.²⁰ In the *Vita Adae et Evae*, Adam is told, after partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, that he would return to partake of the fruit of the tree of life after his resurrection:

And the Lord turned and said to Adam, “From now on I will not allow you to be in Paradise.” And Adam answered and said, “Lord, give me from the tree of life that I might eat before I am cast out.” Then the Lord spoke to Adam, “You shall not now take from it; for it was appointed to the cherubim and the flaming sword which turns to guard it because of you, that you might not taste of it and be immortal forever, but that you might have the strife which the enemy has placed in you. But when you come out of Paradise, if you guard

yourself from all evil, preferring death to it, at the time of the resurrection I will raise you again, and then there shall be given to you from the tree of life, and you shall be immortal forever.”²¹

For Adam and Eve, the journey back to the presence of God was (and is for each of us) to take place on the road of discipleship, a road that would lead them to partake of the fruit of the tree in this life and in the life to come.²²

Getting on the Path Leading to the Tree of Life: Baptism and Pressing Forward

In the Book of Mormon, the dreams and interpretations of partaking of the fruit of the tree of life seem to carry the same ritualistic connotations as they did in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. In 1 Nephi 8:21, Lehi states that he saw “numberless concourses of people, many of whom were pressing forward, that they might obtain the path which led unto the tree by which I stood.” This description highlights the fact that not all people were on the path and that significant effort was being exerted by concourses of people pressing forward just to obtain and get on it. Second Nephi 31:9, 15–21 describe the gateway that brings one *onto* the path and underscores the covenant nature underlying the process. Nephi, at the latter end of his life, discusses the essential nature of baptism and specifically draws upon motifs from the dream of the tree of life to incorporate how the Savior’s baptism “showeth unto the children of men the straitness of the path, and the narrowness of the gate, by which they should enter, he having set the example before them” and that “the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water; and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost. And *then* are ye in this strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life; yea, ye have entered in by the gate; ye have done according to the commandments of the Father and the Son” (2 Nephi 31:9, 17–18; emphasis added).

Elder L. Tom Perry further clarifies the concept that baptism, both by water and by fire, gets one on the path:

The ordinance of baptism by *water and fire* is described as a gate by Nephi (see 2 Nephi 31:17). Why is baptism a gate? Because it is an ordinance denoting entry into a sacred and binding covenant between God and man. Men promise to forsake the world, love and serve their fellowmen, visit the fatherless and the widows in their afflictions,

proclaim peace, preach the gospel, serve the Lord, and keep His commandments. The Lord promises to “pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon [us]” (Mosiah 18:10), redeem His Saints both temporally and spiritually, number them with those of the First Resurrection and offer life eternal. Baptism and receiving the Holy Ghost are the prescribed ways to enter the strait and narrow path to eternal life.²³

This statement describes the path as a covenantal road that leads to the tree of life and makes it clear that it is entered through baptism. Second Nephi 31:19–21 then describes the necessity of traversing the path and enduring to the end by feasting upon the word of Christ (holding the iron rod), as there is no other name or way given to obtain eternal life. In 2 Nephi 33:6–7, 9, Nephi glorifies in Christ, who has redeemed his soul from hell, and describes his charity and hope for others as they also become reconciled unto Christ, enter into the narrow gate, and endure in the strait path leading to eternal life.²⁴

Elder McConkie expounded upon the principle of entering and pressing forward on the covenantal path:

As far as you and I are concerned, at this time, this life is the most important part of all eternity. We have the light and knowledge and revelations of heaven. This life is the time for us to prepare to meet God, to keep the commandments of God, to hearken to the counsels of the living oracles and to press forward in righteousness. The plan of salvation is to find the truth; and the Latter-day Saints have found it. It is to accept the truth; and we have accepted it in the waters of baptism by covenant, a covenant that we will keep the commandments of God. The remaining step is to endure to the end, in righteousness and in faithfulness. Nephi said that repentance and baptism are the gate to salvation, and that having entered in by the gate, men are then in the straight and narrow path which leads to eternal life. We Latter-day Saints have entered in by the gate. We are now on the path. It remains for us to press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. It remains for us to press forward, feasting upon the words of Christ, and endure to the end, which if we do, we will gain eternal life.²⁵

The dreams of the tree of life in the Book of Mormon seem to reflect the following concept: ordinances, covenants, and living the gospel of Jesus Christ constitute the life of discipleship leading along the strait and narrow path to the tree of life.²⁶

Staying on the Path

A major theme of tree of life dreams revolves around staying on the path leading to the tree. Just as Nephi clarified that one gets on the path to eternal life through baptism, he explained that this is only the beginning of the covenant path:

And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay. . . .

Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ,²⁷ and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life. . . .

This is the way; and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God. (2 Nephi 31:19–21).

Elder David A. Bednar describes the need to look to future responsibilities that attend entering the covenant at baptism and enduring to the end—these responsibilities involve the temple. He expounded upon the nature of the gathering of Israel and taught the principle of worshipping in the temple using an analogy given in the Book of Mormon:

This essential relationship between the principle of gathering and the building of temples is highlighted in the Book of Mormon:

“Behold, the field was ripe, and blessed are ye, for ye did thrust in the sickle, and did reap with your might, yea, all the day long did ye labor; and behold the number of your sheaves! And they shall be gathered into the garners, that they are not wasted” (Alma 26:5).

The sheaves in this analogy represent newly baptized members of the Church. The garners are the holy temples. Elder Neal A. Maxwell explained: “Clearly, when we baptize, our eyes should gaze beyond the baptismal font to the holy temple. The great garner into which

the sheaves should be gathered is the holy temple.” . . . This instruction clarifies and emphasizes the importance of sacred temple ordinances and covenants. . . .

The baptismal covenant clearly contemplates a future event or events and looks forward to the temple. . . . As we stand in the waters of baptism, we look to the temple. As we partake of the sacrament, we look to the temple. We pledge to always remember the Savior and to keep His commandments as preparation to participate in the sacred ordinances of the temple and receive the highest blessings available through the name and by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, in the ordinances of the holy temple we more completely and fully take upon us the name of Jesus Christ.²⁸

Elder McConkie clarifies how we progress along the covenantal path and how entering into more covenants is a part of this process: “As with baptism, so it is with celestial marriage. It opens the door, a second door. It starts one out in the direction of exaltation. It puts one on the path that leads to eternal life. You cannot get on the path without entering the gate, but having entered the gate then you must traverse the length of the path. The process of going up that path is the process of keeping the covenant made in connection with this holy order of matrimony. It is the process of obeying the laws, commandments, principles, and ordinances of the gospel.”²⁹

It seems evident that the ancients viewed the path leading to the tree as a covenantal road of discipleship that found its consummation in the exaltation of all the obedient who entered into and remained faithful in the kingdom of God throughout their days. This is also consistent with the application of the dream in latter-day prophetic interpretations.³⁰

As we witness the context in which Lehi’s vision of the tree of life occurs, we see that it fits into the theme of staying on the path and enduring to the end through the hardships he and his family were facing. In 1 Nephi 2:10, in the valley which Lehi named Lemuel, he pleaded with his son to remain faithful, “And he also spake unto Lemuel: O that thou mightest be like unto this valley, firm and steadfast, and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord!”

Just before Lehi explains his dream to his family, he states that he has reason to rejoice because of Nephi and Sam but then expresses the concern he has for Laman and Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 8:3–4). After explaining the dream to his family, Lehi expresses concern once again as “he feared lest they should

be cast off from the presence of the Lord” (1 Nephi 8:36). Lehi desperately attempted to get Laman and Lemuel to hearken unto his words, both as a loving father and as a prophet (playing the part of a key component of the dream—the iron rod), that they may not be “cast off from the presence of the Lord.”³¹ This term seems to imply that Laman and Lemuel had access to the Lord; this takes us back to the scene of the Fall, in which Adam and Eve were cast out of Garden of Eden and driven from the presence of the Lord and the tree of life, and thus situates the content of the dream in this light.³²

A literary device referred to as *framing* highlights the fact that Lehi’s dream was, in fact, speaking to his sons and family members who were already in the covenant; this accentuates Lehi’s pleas for faithfulness and endurance, lessons that are the very essence of the dream. We get some indication of this as we witness the beginning of Nephi’s experience with the dream (which came after his father’s experience): “And all these things did my father see, and hear, and speak, as he dwelt in a tent, in the valley of Lemuel, and also a great many more things, which cannot be written upon these plates” (1 Nephi 9:1). The reference to the valley of Lemuel, where Lehi encouraged Lemuel to be diligent in keeping the commandments, acts as the point of reference that helps bring into focus the entire meaning of the tree of life. Nephi is about to come to understand this meaning through a series of visions and dreams. He states, “For behold, it came to pass after my father had made an end of speaking the words of his dream, and also of exhorting them to all diligence, he spake unto them concerning the Jews” (1 Nephi 10:2). Lehi’s exhortations to be diligent are followed by results stemming from disobedience. In the heading for chapter 10 we read the following: “Lehi predicts the Babylonian captivity—He tells of the coming among the Jews of a Messiah, a Savior, a Redeemer—He tells also of the coming of the one who should baptize the Lamb of God—Lehi tells of the death and resurrection of the Messiah—He compares the scattering and gathering of Israel to an olive tree—Nephi speaks of the Son of God, of the gift of the Holy Ghost, and of the need for righteousness.”

Nephi’s experience in coming to understand the dream takes him into the realms of individuals and peoples who wander off the path and are brought back onto it through the process of being gathered into the covenant through the gospel of Jesus Christ. This gives us glimpses into the magnificent nature of the dream: it is about individuals who are provided firsthand information

as to *how* to come to the tree of life, get on the path to eternal life (see 1 Nephi 15:14), stay on the path, and avoid temptations; however, it also speaks of nations and peoples who apostatized and are to be restored through the covenant, drawing upon the marvelous image encountered in Jacob 5 and the allegory of the olive tree (see 1 Nephi 10:12). The dream thus includes phases of apostasy and restoration cycles.³³ In the next several chapters, Nephi will have the dream explained to him by angels and visions. These will include episodes of the tree of life, the birth and life of the Son of God, the advent of the Twelve Apostles, the great and abominable church, the Apostasy, the colonization of the Americas, the grafting in of the natural branches of the olive tree (see 1 Nephi 15:16), and the Restoration of the gospel in the latter days. Nephi concludes all of these visions and explanations in the following manner: “Wherefore, the wicked are rejected from the righteous, and also from that tree of life, whose fruit is most precious and most desirable above all other fruits; yea, and it is the greatest of all the gifts of God. And thus I spake unto my brethren. Amen” (1 Nephi 15:36).³⁴

After Laman and Lemuel inform Nephi that he has spoken hard things, through the framing device, Nephi draws our attention back to the valley of Lemuel and the message of diligence in keeping the commandments proclaimed there by his father, the prophet: “And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did exhort my brethren, with all diligence, to keep the commandments of the Lord. And it came to pass that they did humble themselves before the Lord; insomuch that I had joy and great hopes of them, that they would *walk in the paths of righteousness*. Now, all these things were said and done as my father dwelt in a tent in the valley which he called Lemuel” (1 Nephi 16:4–6).³⁵

The framing device thus seems to help us wrap our minds around the overall meaning of the vision: diligence on the covenant path leading to exaltation. Nephi hopes that his brothers will get back on that path after their murmuring had taken them off of it. This is really the challenge Lehi’s family is facing: staying on the covenant road when so many hardships and doubts (manifested as the mists of darkness within the dream) are leading some of them away from it. Lehi and Nephi knew there was still much to be done and many promises to be fulfilled and they refused to stray off the path leading to the tree of life. At this point in the story, the interpretation of the dream is over. Its content, however, will occupy the teachings of Book of Mormon prophets throughout the rest of their history.³⁶

The Iron Rod

It is essential for us to stay on the path and endure to the end by making and keeping sacred covenants. This section deals with a component of the dream that explains *how* to stay on the covenant path and avoid getting lost—the iron rod. Nephi explained, “And it came to pass that there arose a mist of darkness; yea, even an exceedingly great mist of darkness, insomuch that they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:23). The mists of darkness posed the greatest threats in preventing individuals from reaching and partaking of the fruit of the tree of life. In their visions, both Lehi and Nephi witnessed what they described as a rod of iron leading to the tree, a rod which, if grasped, would enable those on the path to safely navigate through the mists of darkness. Lehi described this scenario, “And it came to pass that I beheld others pressing forward, and they came forth and caught hold of the end of the rod of iron; and they did press forward through the mist of darkness, clinging to the rod of iron, even until they did come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree” (1 Nephi 8:24). Nephi additionally witnessed this and provided a description of the meaning and purpose of the rod of iron: “And it came to pass that I beheld that the rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life; which waters are a representation of the love of God; and I also beheld that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God” (1 Nephi 11:25).

The rod of iron played a critical role in enabling individuals to stay on the path that would lead them to the tree of life. Mists of darkness (teachings, philosophies, trials, and temptations) would arise throughout the course of life, tempt individuals to release the iron rod (the word of God), and cause them to stray onto foreign paths and become lost. Elder David S. Baxter stated, “The truth is that our only safety, our only security, our only hope is to hold fast to that which is good. As the mists of darkness gather around us, we are only lost if we choose to let go of the iron rod, which is the word of God.”³⁷ Elder Neil L. Andersen described the threefold meaning of the “word of God” in these terms: “The word of God contains three very strong elements that intertwine and sustain one another to form an immovable rod. These three elements include, first, the scriptures, or the words of the ancient prophets. . . . The second element of the word of God is the personal revelation and inspiration that comes to us through the Holy Ghost. . . . The third element,

a critical addition intertwining with the other two, . . . represents the words of the living prophets. We must also hold fast to the word of God as delivered by the living prophets.”³⁸

These same elements are found in Nephi’s life, and we will see that it is by searching the scriptures, following the living prophets, and being guided by the light of the Holy Ghost that safety will be found along the path. Nephi demonstrates the necessity of following these components of the word of God.

1. *Ancient scripture.* When Nephi and his brothers were up against insurmountable odds in trying to retrieve the brass plates (the word of God), Laman and Lemuel murmured, doubted, and feared resistance they might encounter. On the other hand, Nephi, appealing to ancient scripture, declared, “Let us go up; let us be strong like unto Moses; for he truly spake unto the waters of the Red Sea and they divided hither and thither, and our fathers came through, out of captivity, on dry ground, and the armies of Pharaoh did follow and were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea. . . . Let us go up; the Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 4:2–3). Nephi’s experience demonstrates that obedience to the teachings in the scriptures can bring strength and answers to life’s difficult questions and help us keep the commandments in the face of adversity.³⁹ Nephi ultimately explained the reason for obtaining the plates: “And we had obtained the records which the Lord had commanded us, and searched them and found that they were desirable; yea, even of great worth unto us, insomuch that we could preserve the commandments of the Lord unto our children. Wherefore, it was wisdom in the Lord that we should carry them with us, as we journeyed in the wilderness towards the land of promise” (1 Nephi 5:21–22).

In his vision, the sacred nature of the plates was revealed to Nephi, along with the commandment that he and his people keep records of their own. These records would contain the fullness of the truths and covenants of the Lord, which would, at a future date, be removed: “And the angel spake unto me, saying: These last records, which thou hast seen among the Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them; and shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people, that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of

the world; and that all men must come unto him, or they cannot be saved” (1 Nephi 13:40).⁴⁰ Ancient scripture was, and continues to be, a vital component of the word of God that helps keep individuals on the path.⁴¹

2. *The Holy Ghost.* Nephi also consistently draws attention to the absolute necessity of the Holy Ghost’s companionship in remaining faithful and enduring life’s challenges (and thus remaining on the path leading to the tree of life). In 1 Nephi 2:16–18, Nephi describes his own conversion to the teachings of a living prophet, his father. While his brothers were hardening their hearts against the prophet, Nephi’s heart was being softened, changed, and converted by the power of the Holy Ghost. It was this tractability that enabled Nephi to gain a great treasure of revelation:

And it came to pass after I, Nephi, having heard all the words of my father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision, and also the things which he spake by the power of the Holy Ghost, which power he received by faith on the Son of God—and the Son of God was the Messiah who should come—I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him, as well in times of old as in the time that he should manifest himself unto the children of men.

For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round. (1 Nephi 10:17, 19)

Through a series of visions, Nephi sees future events and realizes that people would need the companionship of the Holy Ghost in order to endure to the end. Seeing into the future events of the Restoration, Nephi writes, “And blessed are they who shall seek to bring forth my Zion at that day, for they shall have the gift and the power of the Holy Ghost; and if they endure unto the end they shall be lifted up at the last day, and shall be saved in the everlasting kingdom of the Lamb; and whoso shall publish peace, yea, tidings of great joy, how beautiful upon the mountains shall they be” (1 Nephi 13:37).⁴² Nephi understood well the necessity of utilizing the gift of the Holy Ghost to stay on the path.

3. *The living prophets.* Nephi repeatedly taught his brothers to follow the living prophets, especially their father, and warned against rejecting those prophets. He describes the consequences of such behavior, “For behold, the Spirit of the Lord ceaseth soon to strive with them; for behold, they have rejected the prophets, and Jeremiah have they cast into prison. And they have sought to take away the life of my father, insomuch that they have driven him out of the land” (1 Nephi 7:14). In this verse we learn that rejecting the prophets leads individuals to lose the Spirit. President Henry B. Eyring echoes this teaching in our day:

Now our obligation is to remain worthy of the faith necessary for us to fulfill our promise to sustain those who have been called. The Lord was well pleased with the Church at the beginning of the Restoration, as He is today. But He cautioned the members then, as He does now, that He cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance. For us to sustain those who have been called today, we must examine our lives, repent as necessary, pledge to keep the Lord’s commandments, and follow His servants. The Lord warns us that if we do not do those things, the Holy Ghost will be withdrawn, we will lose the light which we have received, and we will not be able to keep the pledge we have made today to sustain the Lord’s servants in His true Church.⁴³

Nephi describes the difficult struggle his brothers were having in following the living prophets, a struggle that was causing them to lose the Spirit and leading them further and further away from the path to the tree of life: “And thus Laman and Lemuel, being the eldest, did murmur against their father. And they did murmur because they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them. Neither did they believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed according to the words of the prophets. And they were like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father” (1 Nephi 2:12–14).⁴⁴ The lives of Lehi and his family are filled with examples of the necessity of receiving modern revelation through living prophets.

Elder Andersen’s threefold description of the word of God is confirmed in the course of Nephi’s teachings.⁴⁵ As it is today, so it was with the Nephites. All three elements of the word of God help individuals to endure through the mists of darkness and avoid deception and falling off the covenant path.

Obedying all three components of the word, not just one or two, is the key to staying on the path.⁴⁶

Concluding Observations

When we look at the path that leads to the tree of life in the visions of Lehi and Nephi, we find a path that is entered onto through the waters of baptism, a path accompanied by an iron rod representing the words of the ancient and living prophets, as well as the guidance of the Holy Ghost. We find a covenantal path of discipleship that may only be endured by traversing the mists of darkness and avoiding straying from that path by clinging to the rod. Having entered that path, the journey would be dangerous. President Packer stated, “At your baptism and confirmation, you took hold of the iron rod. But you are never safe. It is *after* you have partaken of that fruit that your test will come.”⁴⁷ The dreams of the tree of life invite all to get on the path by making covenants, and, once they are on the path, to speak to individuals and encourage them to stay true to the covenants they have entered into. Lehi describes the dangers these people would face but simplifies the response to dangerous situations in our lives: “And after they had tasted of the fruit they were ashamed, because of those that were scoffing at them; and they fell away into forbidden paths and were lost, . . . [and] they did point the finger of scorn at me and those that were partaking of the fruit also; *but we heeded them not* (1 Nephi 8:28, 33; emphasis added).⁴⁸

President Packer stated, “The mist of darkness will cover you at times so much that you will not be able to see your way even a short distance ahead. You will not be able to see clearly. But with the gift of the Holy Ghost, you can *feel* your way ahead through life. Grasp the iron rod, and do not let go.”⁴⁹ The covenant path to the tree of life marks the way to return to the presence of God to live with Him in immortality and enjoy eternal life; this is the plan of salvation revealed to Adam and Eve after the Fall and made possible only in and through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. The covenant path seen in the dreams truly encompasses and highlights the meaning of the love of God—the very meaning of the tree of life. President Ezra Taft Benson left us this blessing: “God bless all of us that we may follow the course laid out for us by our Heavenly Father and our greatest example—the Lord, Jesus Christ. May we do so regardless of what the world may say or do, that we may hold fast to the iron rod, that we may be true to the faith, that we may maintain

the standards set for us and follow this course to safety and exaltation (see 1 Nephi 8:19). The door is open. The plan is here on earth. It is the Lord's plan. The authority and power are here. It is now up to you."⁵⁰

Notes

1. See, for example, Neil L. Andersen, "Hold Fast to the Words of the Prophets" (CES fireside, March 4, 2007); David A. Bednar, "A Reservoir of Living Water" (CES fireside, February 4, 2007), 6; and Boyd K. Packer, "Finding Ourselves in Lehi's Dream," *Ensign*, August 2010, 21–25.

2. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 1:56; emphasis added.

3. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 3:447.

4. Neal A. Maxwell, "Becoming a Disciple," *Ensign*, June 1996, 12.

5. "Finding Rest in Christ," in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 426; emphasis added.

6. Packer, "Finding Ourselves," 22.

7. The sacred tree motif is also found on garments in Assyria, as well as on numerous objects in various cultures, demonstrating the prominence of this motif in Near Eastern religiosity. See Donald W. Parry, *The Cherubim, the Flaming Sword, the Path and the Tree of Life* (forthcoming), 9–10, and bibliography. He states: "Sacred trees or plants figure prominently in ancient Near Eastern cultures. Not only are they mentioned or described in texts, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, but there exist numerous art motifs of sacred trees that are displayed on jewelry, seals, sculptures, wall paintings, stelae, cylinder seals, monuments, and garments. The concept of sacred trees also belongs to the ancient Mediterranean communities and Far Eastern cultures. According to Amihai Mazar, these trees 'have been and continue to be one of the most basic features of human religion in many cultures and periods.' These trees have magical or healing powers. The trees may represent a deity, a king, or a queen. Scholars have also associated the tree of life with Jesus's cross of Jesus Christ himself."

8. See E. O. James, "The Tree of Life," *Folklore* 79, no. 4 (1968): 245–46.

9. See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1987), 1:62.

10. John M. Steadman, "The 'Tree of Life' Symbolism in *Paradise Regain'd*," *Review of English Studies* 11, no. 44 (1960): 384.

11. Richard D. Draper describes partaking of the fruit of the tree of life in Revelation 2 as follows: "The promises to the faithful individual symbolize exaltation and come loaded with allusions to the temple. The promise is that they shall eat of the tree of life in paradise and of the hidden manna (see 2:7, 17), both considered to be the food of angels, but the former with particular significance. In it was the seed of 'eternal lives' (D&C

132:24) and immunity to death (see D&C 132:19–22; Gen. 3:12–24).” *Opening the Seven Seals: The Visions of John the Revelator* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 40.

12. Steadman, “The ‘Tree of Life’ Symbolism,” 384–85. The sacred tree’s connection with deity and ritual is also displayed in condemned practices in the groves and high places mentioned in the Old Testament. The sacramental rituals of totems within groups in the Sudan have been linked to the concepts of the tree of life and the power and order such practices bring to the group. See James, “Tree of Life,” 248–49.

13. C. Wilfred Griggs summarizes the writings in which we find images of the tree of life: “Jewish literature outside the Old Testament also contains tree of life references. The Books of Enoch, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, and 4 Ezra are the best known of such books. When Enoch journeyed to the Seven Sacred Mountains, he saw a sacred tree similar to a date palm but more beautiful and grand than any he had ever beheld (see 1 Enoch 29). His guide on the visionary journey, Michael, told Enoch that the fruit of the tree could not be eaten by mortals until they were purified after the judgment and that they would have to enter the temple of God to partake of it. (See 1 Enoch 25.) In the Secrets of Enoch 9:1, the seer is shown the heavenly dwelling place of the righteous, where stands the tree of life. In the Testament of Levi 18:9–11, Enoch prophesies that in the last days the Lord ‘shall open the gates of paradise, and shall remove the threatening sword against Adam. And he shall give to the saints to eat from the tree of life, and the spirit of holiness shall be on them.’ Likewise, 4 Ezra 8:52 promises to the righteous that in the last days ‘is opened Paradise, planted the Tree of life; the future Age prepared, plenteousness made ready.’ Jewish literature often portrays the tree of life as the seat of an oracle of God, a source of inspiration as well as of nourishment, a sacred sanctuary apart from worldly cares and dangers.” “The Tree of Life in Ancient Cultures,” *Ensign*, June 1988, 27.

14. Griggs, “Ancient Cultures,” 27. The god Thoth, here depicted as inscribing the name of the king on the tree, is also found in final judgment scenes where the deceased is presented at the divine scales awaiting his eternal fate. Thoth was the divine scribe who had recorded the deeds of the individual. If the deceased was declared “justified,” access was granted to appear before the throne of Osiris.

15. See T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden* (Louvain: Peeters, 2000), 459.

16. Charles W. Penrose describes the immortal state and marriage of Adam and Eve in the Garden; this highlights the significant nature of what the tree of life symbolized, both before and after the Fall, “The first marriage recorded in scripture was the union of immortals. The curse of death had not been pronounced when the ceremony was solemnized. There was no sin then, and therefore there was no death. The man and woman became one as eternal beings, and dominion was given to them over all earthly things, together.” *“Mormon” Doctrine, Plain and Simple, or, Leaves from the Tree of Life* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), 49.

17. Notice that cherubim and a flaming sword kept *the way of the tree of life* (see Moses 4:31; emphasis added). Thus the way could only be accessed and traveled by those who could pass by the cherubic guards.

18. Alvin R. Dyer stated, “Adam and Eve, cut off from the presence of God, were given instruction concerning the necessity of repentance as a means to regain their place in God’s presence, there to continue in the way of light and intelligence to the attainment

of ultimate perfection. Adam, seeking earnestly to know the will of God, asked this question of the Lord: 'Why is it that men must repent and be baptized in water?' (Moses 6:53). The Lord's answer was clear and distinct, for unto Adam and Eve, who had fallen from God and upon whom darkness had come, came this vital instruction of about the necessity of repentance: 'Wherefore teach it unto your children, that all men, everywhere, must repent, or they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God' (Moses 6:57)." In Conference Report, October 1969, 54.

19. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 1:228–29.

20. "The earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory" (Articles of Faith 1:10). Much could be said about the covenantal implications of the cherubim guarding the path leading back to the tree of life. This does factor into the visions of the tree of life in the Book of Mormon but cannot be discussed in this short paper. For a good discussion on the topic, see Parry, *The Cherubim*, 26–27, which describes the nature and relationship of the Garden of Eden, temples, and ritual in returning to partake of the tree of life: "The primary mission of the cherubim, together with the flaming sword, was to serve as guardians of the path that leads to the tree of life. . . . All three components—holding to the rod of iron, overcoming the world, and gestures of approach—are obligatory for those who wish to approach the tree of life and partake of its fruits. One may not choose one component and ignore the other two. . . . In sum, God established safeguards to protect the path to his tree of life. Primarily these are the cherubim and the flaming, revolving sword. When one attempts to travel the path without authorization, he or she will be cut down by the sword and/or burned by the sword's flame. To obtain proper authorization to travel the path, one must hold to the rod of iron, or grasp the word of God, overcome the world, and so live to become one who is allowed entry into the sacred temple of the Lord." Subsequently, "it has been suggested by numerous Latter-day Saint scholars that the Garden of Eden was the first temple, inasmuch as it was there that God first revealed himself to man. In addition to this similarity, the Garden of Eden may have possessed a number of other features similar to later temples, thus serving as the great archetype of the House of the Lord." Cobin T. Volluz, "Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 14–38. The earthly temple has also been linked to replicating the Garden of Eden, an archetype of the earthly temple, thus providing a "linkage between the garden in Genesis 2–3 and the spiritual experience of the Temple." T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, 309. See also Draper, *Opening the Seven Seals*, 241, for a discussion on Revelation 22 and the celestial city, where the throne of God is found, designated as the new Eden and in whose midst the tree of life stands.

21. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 2:285. In Revelation, John summarizes the general process of coming to the tree of life, "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city" (Revelation 22:14). In *Opening the Seven Seals*, Richard D. Draper writes: "Note that the tree stands alone. It has no competition. The tree of good and evil has ceased to exist because the inhabitants of the city, knowing good from evil, have spurned all evil and eternally choose the good. In consequence the cherubim, placed to guard the tree of life, have

been removed, allowing God's people to eat freely of the fruit. . . . The prophet Nephi stated, 'I beheld that the rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life' (1 Ne. 11:25). Note that in Nephi's vision the tree and the water represent the same thing, each image expressing but a different aspect. The same is true in Revelation. The heart of John's city is love—the pure love of Christ. John, as few others, understood the life-power behind that love. 'For God so loved the world,' he testified, 'that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life' (John 3:16, KJV). Christ was the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. He became flesh so that 'as many as received him,' he could give the 'power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name' (John 1:12, KJV). In another epistle the Seer had taught the Saints: 'God is love,' and 'love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God' (1 Jn. 4:7–8, KJV). In the eternal city, all are free to partake of that love, which flows out of him and sustains and embraces all who have been transformed into his very image." *Opening the Seven Seals*, 241, 245. Robert J. Matthews adds, "those in the meridian of time who were earnest in their hearts partook of the living fruit from the living tree of life offered by Christ and his appointed servants; those who rejected the fruit denied themselves access to God's new covenant with Israel and spurned fellowship with the Mediator of that covenant." *Selected Writings of Robert L. Millet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 52.

22. The Prophet Joseph Smith described teaching presiding leaders of the Church in his day: "I spent the day in the upper part of the store, that is in my private office, . . . instructing them in the principles and order of the Priesthood, attending to washings, anointings, endowments and the communication of keys pertaining to the Aaronic Priesthood, and so on to the highest order of the Melchizedek Priesthood, setting forth the order pertaining to the Ancient of Days, and all those plans and principles by which any one is enabled to secure the fullness of those blessings which have been prepared for the Church of the Firstborn, and come up and abide in the presence of the Eloheim in the eternal worlds. In this council was instituted the ancient order of things for the first time in these last days." *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 237.

23. L. Tom Perry, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ," *Ensign*, May 2008, 44–46; emphasis added. Henry B. Eyring explains, "The book makes plain that we must receive the Holy Ghost as a baptism of fire to help us stay on the strait and narrow path." "The Book of Mormon as a Personal Guide," *Ensign*, September 2010, 4.

24. The distinction is often made between the "straight" path (one without deviation or without curves) and the "strait path" (strict, narrow, or rigorous). See McConkie and Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary*, 1:362; and Stephen E. Robinson and H. Dean Garrett, *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 1:156. D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner describe the difference in terms of the Savior's path. He was the only sinless individual who never needed course corrections, his path was "straight," versus our path, which is "strait." An important usage of the "strait path" often associates it with the covenant path. *The Four Gospels* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 221–22. McConkie and Millet describe this as "the emphasis is on the strictness with which all who would be saved must comply with the ordinances

of salvation." *Doctrinal Commentary*, 362. Robinson and Garrett add, "A strait or narrow gate must be approached deliberately and at just the right angle. It is restrictive. Only what has originated or been sealed on God's side of the gate, that which is eternal, can be carried with us through the gate into God's kingdom. The saying 'You can't take it with you' is not true of priesthood blessings, ordinances, and sealings." *Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants*, 156. Nephi seems to use the "strait path" in this covenantal context and later pleads, "O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me, that I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road!" (2 Nephi 4:32). This highlights the rigorous nature of the path to eternal life. Second Nephi 9:18 also describes this: "But, behold, the righteous, the saints of the Holy One of Israel, they who have believed in the Holy One of Israel, they who have endured the crosses of the world, and despised the shame of it, they shall inherit the kingdom of God, which was prepared for them from the foundation of the world, and their joy shall be full forever."

25. "It may seem preposterous to many to declare that within the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may be found a bulwark to safeguard against the pitfalls, the frustrations, and the wickedness in the world. The plan of salvation formed in the heavens points clearly to the straight and narrow path that leads to eternal life, even though there are many who refuse to follow that way. . . . The mission of this church is to bear witness of the truths of the gospel and put to flight the false teachings on every side that are causing the restlessness and the aimlessness that threaten all who have not found the straight path and that which could be an anchor to their souls." Harold B. Lee, "The Iron Rod," *Ensign*, April 1971, 5.

26. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, "A man may be saved, after the judgment, in the terrestrial kingdom, or in the telestial kingdom, but he can never see the celestial kingdom of God, without being born of water and the Spirit. He may receive a glory like unto the moon, [i.e. of which the light of the moon is typical], or a star, [i.e. of which the light of the stars is typical], but he can never come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels; to the general assembly and Church of the Firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, unless he becomes as a little child, and is taught by the Spirit of God." *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 12.

27. Later Book of Mormon prophets adopted the theme of enduring to the end on the covenant path; they identified feasting upon the word as an essential behavior that would help qualify individuals to eventually partake of the fruit of the tree. Additionally, the fruit is compared to virtues that have yielded fruit, as is witnessed in the book of Proverbs. See Alma 32:40–43; Proverbs 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4.

28. David A. Bednar, "Honorably Hold a Name and Standing," *Ensign*, May 2009, 97–100. In light of the current discussion on the tree of life, this connection with the temple in the Book of Mormon is important. The nature of the tree of life in the Garden of Eden is significant in this regard, as the garden can be viewed as God's temple and the temple as a re-creation of the garden. It is also interesting that the Nephites operated under the Melchizedek Priesthood, as there were no Levites in their group. See Paul Y. Hoskisson, "By What Authority Did Lehi, a Non-Levite Priest, Offer

Sacrifices?" *Ensign*, March 1994, 54; and David R. Seely, "Lehi's Altar and Sacrifice in the Wilderness," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 1 (2001): 62–69.

29. Bruce R. McConkie, "New and Everlasting Covenant of Marriage," in *BYU Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Publications, 1960), 6. It is important that in 1 Nephi 16:7–8, Nephi describes the command of the Lord to return and find wives for him and his brothers in these terms: "And it came to pass that I, Nephi, took one of the daughters of Ishmael to wife; and also, my brethren took of the daughters of Ishmael to wife; and also Zoram took the eldest daughter of Ishmael to wife. And thus my father had fulfilled all the commandments of the Lord which had been given unto him. And also, I, Nephi, had been blessed of the Lord exceedingly." Joseph Fielding McConkie, Robert L. Millet, and Brent L. Top also point out the multiple usage of gates within the context of baptism (getting on the path to eternal life) and eternal marriage (exaltation). *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 4:93–94.

30. This concept of partaking of the fruit at baptism, as a condition that would lead to the ultimate partaking of the fruit and exaltation in God's kingdom, is paralleled in a summary of Jacob's dream, in which he sees the Lord standing at the top of a ladder (see Genesis 28:10–19). Marion G. Romney described the rungs of the ladder as covenants that Jacob would have to make, "Jacob realized that the covenants he made with the Lord there were the rungs on the ladder that he himself would have to climb in order to obtain the promised blessings—blessings that would entitle him to enter heaven and associate with the Lord." "Temples—The Gates to Heaven," *Ensign*, March 1971, 16. Andrew C. Skinner writes: "Thanks to Elder Romney's insight, Latter-day Saints can more fully understand that their temple experiences are really the experiences of every Saint in every dispensation. Jacob's faithfulness was rewarded with an opportunity to make eternal temple covenants. But the great promises and blessings proffered to Jacob in Bethel at that time were conditional rather than absolute. Nowhere does the text say they were sealed or ratified with surety at this point, as is sometimes supposed; Jacob would have a long time to prove his loyalty and secure for himself the unconditional guarantee of all the terms of the covenant. Neither does the text say that Jacob's dealings with the Lord at that time constituted the ultimate theophany, or revelation of God, which the scriptures promise to the faithful. This would come later, after years of his righteousness. But Jacob undoubtedly came away from Bethel understanding the order of heaven, the possibilities for exaltation, and the promises of the Abrahamic covenant if he proved faithful. So it is with all of us." "Jacob: Keeper of Covenants," *Ensign*, March 1998, 51.

31. Henry B. Eyring states, "I speak today of young people already within His true Church and so are started on the strait and narrow way to return to their heavenly home. He wants them to gain early the spiritual strength to stay on the path. And He needs our help to get them back to the path quickly should they begin to wander." "Help Them on Their Way Home," *Ensign*, May 2010, 22–25. Lehi and Nephi seem to be attempting to get Laman and Lemuel back on the path when they are beginning to wander off it. They seem to have some success as Laman and Lemuel repent several times in these early episodes and follow the commands of the Lord. However, Lehi's concerns eventually materialize. President Eyring taught, "All of us feel, in our best moments, a desire to return home to live with God. He gave us all the gift of His Beloved Son as our Savior to

provide the path and to teach us how to follow it. He gave us prophets to point the way. The Prophet Joseph Smith was inspired to translate the record of prophets that is the Book of Mormon. It is our sure guide on the way home to God. . . . Each time I read even a few lines in the Book of Mormon, I feel my testimony strengthened that the book is true, that Jesus is the Christ, that we can follow Him home, and that we can take those we love home with us." "Personal Guide," 4–5.

32. As we do not possess the original text, we do not know what word was used here for "cast off." If it is parallel with the word in the garden scene, "drive out, cast out," then the Hebrew text offers another interesting parallel of being "cast out" of the presence of God. See Genesis 4:14 where Cain is cast out from the face of the Lord. Moses 5 contains a more detailed account of Cain's rejection of the covenant and highlights his rebellion against God.

33. For a discussion on the potentially long span and repercussions of Lehi's dream and its interpretation, see Volluz, "Lehi's Dream," 16: "The primary interpretation revealed to Nephi of Lehi's dream of the tree of life was a panoramic view of the future from the advent of the Savior in mortality up until the Second Coming." What is striking, and thus a large part of the warning of the dream to the covenant people, is that Israel is described as part of the host fighting against the Apostles and the Lamb (see 1 Nephi 11:35).

34. Nephi's description of the "righteous" here clearly takes on a covenantal relationship with God. A few examples paralleling this include the following: "And I said unto them that it was an awful gulf, which separated the wicked from the tree of life, and also *from the saints of God*" (1 Nephi 15:28; emphasis added); "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith *unto the churches*; to him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7; emphasis added); "Yea, he saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely" (Alma 5:34); "I speak by way of command unto you that *belong to the church*; and unto those who *do not belong to the church* I speak by way of invitation, saying: Come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be partakers of the fruit of the tree of life" (Alma 5:62; emphasis added). This last verse teaches that the "wicked" Nephi referenced are not all people outside of the covenant. The visions of the tree of life describe many good people pressing forward to get on the path, and Alma 5:62 describes the necessity of missionary work in bolstering those individual's efforts. See also McConkie and Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary*, 1:360–62, for a discussion on the covenant nature of the "righteous."

35. See 2 Nephi 33, where Nephi, towards the end of his life, glories in Christ, using phraseology from the tree of life vision. In 2 Nephi 4, Lehi offers patriarchal blessings to his grandchildren. As he describes the tree of life within the context of his vision, Lehi expresses concern that the seed of Laman and Lemuel will be "cut off" from the presence of the Lord and discusses the need to be "brought up in the way ye should go" (2 Nephi 4:4–5; emphasis added).

36. For a few other passages relevant to the tree of life, see 1 Nephi 8:24–25, 28; Alma 5:21–24, 26–27, 33–38 (39), 53–57, 62; and Alma 6:3. Also see Helaman 3:24–30, which uses similar language to describe entering the covenant through baptism, laying hold upon the word of God, and being led in a strait and narrow course to the presence

of God. Noel B. Reynolds offers a summary of the process of getting and staying on the path: “Alma teaches Zeezrom and others at Ammonihah that God ‘has all power to save every man that believeth on his name and bringeth forth fruit meet for repentance’ (Alma 12:15, cf. 12:33; 13:13; 34:30). Mormon writes to his son, Moroni, that “the first fruits of repentance is baptism” (Moroni 8:25). We have seen that baptism is tightly linked to repentance because it serves as a public witness to the Father of the private, internal covenant the repentant sinner makes to turn from evil and keep all of the Father’s commandments. Repentance is incomplete without baptism, and baptism is meaningless without repentance. Thus the person who has come to believe in Christ and trust in his power of deliverance must enter the strait gate of repentance and baptism, which starts him on the road to eternal life. The straitness or narrowness of the gate indicates that people must go through one at a time by an act of their own and that only the prescribed acts or choices are adequate for this gate. It also shows that the gate leads precisely to the entrance to one path, not the myriad of paths that lead to other destinations. The path to eternal life has one starting place and hence needs only one narrow gate to admit those who will walk it. Rich and poor enter on the same terms, as unaccompanied pedestrians, leaving all burdens and possessions behind. They all walk with God or with the guidance of his Spirit (the iron rod) as long as they wish to progress to the tree of life and partake of its fruit.” “The True Points of My Doctrine,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 26–56.

37. David S. Baxter, “Faith, Service, Constancy,” in Conference Report, October 2006.

38. Neil L. Andersen, “Hold Fast to the Words of the Prophets” (CES fireside, March 4, 2007), 3.

39. A. Theodore Tuttle, “Developing Faith,” *Ensign*, November 1986, 73, taught that “[Nephi] was trying to do what you and I as parents need to do with our families today—to develop faith in the Lord. And the way to do it is to recount the examples of faith that have happened in our history and in our heritage and with our people. That’s the value of history. It contains accounts of faith of our own blood and ancestry and of our own people and our children.”

40. See also 1 Nephi 13:23–27. Subsequently, the Lord stated, “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me” (John 5:39).

41. To highlight the essential nature of the scriptures, Omni 1:17 states that the Mulekites, a group of people who had left Jerusalem around the time of Lehi and his family, had lost their language and “denied the being of their Creator” because “they had brought no records with them.”

42. The reference to mountains here may be linked to the temple (see Isaiah 2 and 2 Nephi 12). Mountain experiences are often linked with theophanies and divine manifestations. For a few examples, see Moses 1:1; 7:3–4, 17; Exodus 3:1; Matthew 17:1–2; 1 Nephi 11:1; and 2 Nephi 4:25.

43. Henry B. Eyring, “The True and Living Church,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 20–24.

44. A significant challenge faced in Jerusalem during Lehi’s day was the presence of false prophets who were proclaiming false ideologies (see, for example, Jeremiah 28). These teachings split the kingdom of Judah and would eventually lead to its downfall. For a discussion on this topic, see Aaron P. Schade, “The Kingdom of Judah: Politics,

Prophets, and Scribes in the Late Preexilic Period,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*,” ed. David R. Seely, JoAnn H. Seely, and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Covenant Communications, 2004).

45. Andersen, “Hold Fast,” 3. Elder Andersen subsequently quoted George Q. Cannon, then a member of the First Presidency, in a summary of the interrelatedness of these constituents: “We have the Bible, the Book of Mormon and the Book of Doctrine and Covenants; but all these books, without the living oracles and a constant stream of revelation from the Lord, would not lead any people into the Celestial Kingdom of God. This may seem a strange declaration to make, but strange as it may sound, it is nevertheless true. Of course, these records are all of infinite value. They cannot be too highly prized, nor can they be too closely studied. But in and of themselves, with all the light that they give, they are insufficient to guide the children of men and to lead them into the presence of God. To be thus led requires a living Priesthood and constant revelation from God to the people according to the circumstances in which they may be placed.”

46. Elder Claudio D. Zivic states, “I testify that we can avoid the mists of darkness that lead to personal apostasy by repenting of our sins, overcoming offense, eliminating faultfinding, and following our Church leaders. We can also avoid those mists by humbling ourselves, forgiving others, keeping our covenants, partaking of the sacrament worthily each week, and strengthening our testimonies through prayer, daily scripture study, temple attendance where possible, magnifying our Church callings, and serving our fellowmen.” “Avoiding Personal Apostasy,” *Ensign*, June 2009, 27. This statement highlights the covenant road of discipleship leading to the tree of life.

47. Packer, “Finding Ourselves,” 23.

48. Elder Dennis B. Neuenschwander stated, “In reality these stories are not about crowds but individuals among those crowds. They are really about you and me. All of us are among the crowds of this world. Almost all of us are like the woman who, despite the crowd, comes to the Savior. We all have faith that just a touch will bring healing to our aching souls and relief to our innermost needs. New members of the Church in many lands are often like Alma. They hear the words of life when no one else in their family or circle of friends does. Yet they still have the courage to accept the gospel and chart a course through the crowds. I think each one of us understands what it means to partake of the fulfilling fruit of the tree of life within sight and sound of those who mock and what it means to exert every courageous effort to pay them no heed.” “One among the Crowd,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 101–3.

49. Packer, “Finding Ourselves,” 23; emphasis added.

50. *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 26.