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VISION, VOICE, PATH, AND ROD

COMING TO PARTAKE OF THE FULNESS

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SINCE THE LORD SAYS THAT THE Book of Mormon contains the “fulness of my everlasting gospel” (D&C 27:5), it is uniquely positioned in “the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST” (title page to the Book of Mormon). This purpose is accomplished as the book “puts forth the doctrines of the gospel, outlines the plan of salvation, and tells man what they must do to gain peace in this life and eternal salvation in the life to come” (introduction to the Book of Mormon). Thus, in addition to the doctrinal fulness contained in the book, the Book of Mormon offers practical teachings that demonstrate what must be done to embrace the everlasting gospel. This approach is clearly found in Lehi’s vision of the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 8).

While Lehi’s vision masterfully illustrates that individuals must come unto Christ and partake of His fruit, it also provides insight on how man accomplishes this task. Although it is often assumed that every person who arrives at the tree of life arrives in the same

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manner, Lehi's vision actually describes four different ways individuals or groups arrive at the tree. This paper focuses on how individuals or groups come to Christ and partake of the fulness of His joy through revelation, prophetic guidance, living the gospel, and holding fast to the word of God as outlined in Lehi's dream.

REVELATION

We must remember that the first person to arrive at the tree of life was Lehi himself. While following his guide through a "dark and dreary waste" and spending "many hours in darkness," Lehi prayed unto the Lord for mercy (1 Nephi 8:7–8). It was at this point that Lehi's vision drastically changed. "And it came to pass after I had prayed unto the Lord I beheld a large and spacious field. And it came to pass that I beheld a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy" (1 Nephi 8:9–10). With prayer as a catalyst, new objects were visible or revealed to Lehi. His view expanded sufficiently for him to see through the darkness and the waste, almost as if someone had turned on the lights. Just as Moses foundered in darkness until he was enlightened by God, out of a burning bush (see Moses 1:17–18), so too did Lehi's wanderings and torment of darkness cease with his revelatory expansion. President Spencer W. Kimball taught, "There are bushes aflame with God in every desert; if one can see and hear and understand, revelation is there."¹

The narrative describing Lehi's success is simple and straightforward. It appears that with no other information, except for the revelatory answer to his prayer, Lehi "did go forth and partake of the fruit" of the tree (1 Nephi 8:11). Lehi's journey was summarized in only three verses (see 1 Nephi 8:9–11). How did he accomplish his task so efficiently? What was the secret to his success? "With the help of prayer," President Ezra Taft Benson concluded, "Lehi was led to partake of the fruit of that tree, which provided him 'with exceeding great joy.'"² Likewise, young Joseph Smith was also delivered from impending darkness and led to Christ with the help of prayer. As Joseph exerted all his powers "to call upon God to deliver" him, he saw a pillar of light descending over him that delivered him

from the enemy and opened a vision of incalculable consequence (Joseph Smith—History 1:16).

From this pattern in Lehi's dream, we too can expect guidance through revelation in our personal journey through mortality. President Lorenzo Snow taught that it is "the grand privilege of every Latter-day Saint . . . to have the manifestations of the Spirit every day of our lives."³ Elder Dallin H. Oaks offered the following illustrations of this point: "A child loses a treasured possession, prays for help, and is inspired to find it; an adult has a problem at work, at home, or in genealogical research, prays, and is led to the information necessary to resolve it; a Church leader prays to know whom the Lord would have him call to fill a position, and the Spirit whispers a name."⁴ While our experiences with revelation may not be as dramatic as Lehi's or young Joseph Smith's, they can broaden our own perspective, help us determine relevance of events in our own life, and reveal solutions that we have not yet considered or even could not have imagined without divine guidance. In short, revelation provides sufficient direction to lead us onward to the Savior. With this in mind, President Gordon B. Hinckley's urging to "be prayerful" is another reminder of Lehi's vision. In tones reminiscent of Lehi's early experience of wandering in the vast field, President Hinckley reminds us that "you can't do it alone. You know that. You cannot make it alone and do your best. You need the help of the Lord, . . . and the marvelous thing is that you have the opportunity to pray, with the expectation that your prayers will be heard and answered."⁵

PROPHETIC GUIDANCE

Once Lehi had eaten the fruit from the tree of life, he desired that his family should also partake (see 1 Nephi 8:12). He saw his wife, Sariah, and two of his sons, Sam and Nephi, in the distance "as if they knew not whither they should go" (1 Nephi 8:14). Lehi "beckoned" them and also called "unto them with a loud voice" that they should come unto him and partake of the fruit (1 Nephi 8:15).

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According to the recorded vision, these three family members “did come . . . and partake of the fruit also” (1 Nephi 8:16).

Two distinct groups have now arrived at the tree of life, and both have partaken of the fruit. Yet interestingly enough, the ways both groups not only discovered but came to the tree were very different. Lehi first saw the tree after praying for mercy and deliverance. Through revelation, he discovered and found the tree. Sariah, Sam, and Nephi, on the other hand, were also lost. Yet the beckoning voice of Lehi gave them notice and guidance to come to the tree. It is important to point out that Lehi’s guiding instructions were not only those from a concerned spouse and parent, but also those concerned with his prophetic call. Without diminishing his role as a partner and parent nor the stewardship therewith, it is important to underscore Lehi’s other stewardship. Lehi was a “visionary man” (1 Nephi 2:11). He saw visions, dreamed dreams, and recorded the prophecies he received (see 1 Nephi 1:16). His stewardship extended beyond the boundaries of personal and family inspiration. By commandment, Lehi began to prophesy and declare the things revealed to him in dreams and visions to the people of Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 1:18; 2:1). In short, Lehi became what was noted in the Old Testament as nabi (literally a spokesman), or as is commonly translated in current Old Testament texts, a prophet. Lehi was not only a husband and a father seeking to guide and direct his own family, he was also the living prophet of the time—their living prophet.

If the text of the vision is taken literally, the only factor influencing the second group in coming to the tree of life was the living prophet. It is hard to imagine that Sariah, Sam, and Nephi would not have prayed for deliverance, mercy, or even guidance. But we find that the text is actually expanding other possibilities and is not diminishing the powerful connection between prayer and revelation and inspirational deliverance (we have already seen that point emphasized with Lehi’s experience). In truth, the text bears powerful insight to the need for a living prophet and the necessity of following that prophet. When reflecting upon the motives and actions of Lehi through the first eight chapters of Nephi’s record, Lehi’s role

as a prophet of God is clear. In fact, it was almost as if Gordon B. Hinckley, when describing his role as a living prophet to a curious interviewer, was also describing the role of Lehi of old. President Hinckley said: “My role is to declare doctrine. My role is to stand as an example before the people. My role is to be a voice in defense of the truth. My role is to stand as a conservator of those values which are important in our civilization and our society. My role is to lead people.”⁶

With the prophetic mantle firmly shouldered by Lehi, he led those not knowing “whither they should go” to the tree of life (1 Nephi 8:14). This vignette underscores the importance of not only having a living prophet but also of following that prophet’s counsel. “Now the only safety we have as members of this church is to do exactly what the Lord said to the Church in that day when the Church was organized,” President Harold B. Lee taught. He then concluded, “We must learn to give heed to the words and commandments that the Lord shall give through his prophet.”⁷

Unfortunately, Lehi found that not all would give heed to his words. Laman and Lemuel, for example, “would not come unto me and partake of the fruit” (1 Nephi 8:18). While this episode of the dream is heart-wrenching and caused discomfort to Lehi, it extends an important warning to those who disregard or even discount the teachings of the living prophets. Icons of self-centeredness, Laman and Lemuel not only serve as reminders of the outcome of such behavior but also portray the character of those who follow in their footsteps. Laman and Lemuel, known for their “stiffneckedness,” were unbelievers who “knew not the dealings of . . . God” (1 Nephi 2:11–12). Ironically, their lack of knowledge of God’s dealings was not due to lack of personal experience with godly things. On several occasions, they felt the power of the Spirit (see 1 Nephi 2:14), saw an angel (see 1 Nephi 2:29), and even heard the voice of the Lord (see 1 Nephi 17:45). Despite their many experiences, they were still unfamiliar with the Lord. Instead of finding liberation in Lehi’s prophecies, they saw only restrictions of personal behavior. “There will be some things that take patience and faith,” President Lee cautioned. “You may not like what comes from the authority of the

Church. It may contradict your political views. It may contradict your social views. It may interfere with some of your social life. But if you listen to these things, as if from the mouth of the Lord himself, with patience and faith, the promise is that ‘the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; yea, and the Lord God will disperse the powers of darkness from before you, and cause the heavens to shake for your good, and his name’s glory’ (D&C 21:6).”⁸

Rather than finding the tree by following the voice of the prophet—like the rest of their family—Laman and Lemuel mocked their father’s visions as “foolish imaginations of his heart” (1 Nephi 2:11) and “murmured” against him (1 Nephi 2:12). While Nephi, Laman, and Lemuel all used the term “visionary man” to describe their father, the term held a stark difference for each user. For Nephi, it reflected his own humility, as well as his reverence for and dependence upon God, while for Laman and Lemuel it was a term of disgust. Their view of a visionary man reflected their conceit and coveted independence from God. Elder Henry B. Eyring described this situation in the following way: “Looking for the path to safety in the counsel of prophets makes sense to those with strong faith. When a prophet speaks, those with little faith may think that they hear only a wise man giving good advice. Then if his counsel seems comfortable and reasonable, squaring with what they want to do, they take it. If it does not, they consider it either faulty advice or they see their circumstances as justifying their being an exception to the counsel.”⁹

THE PATH—LIVING THE GOSPEL

Two groups have now arrived at the tree and have partaken of the fruit; one came by way of prayer and revelation and the other by heeding the voice of the prophet. As Lehi looked to find and guide the rest of his stewards, he saw a path “which came . . . even to the tree” where he stood (1 Nephi 8:20). It now becomes apparent that there is another means of accessing the tree of life. The path in Lehi’s vision is typically interpreted to mean the gospel of Jesus Christ and is described as being both “strait” and “narrow”

(1 Nephi 8:20). Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, taught that because the way is strait and narrow, “few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:14). To some, this might be interpreted to mean that locating the path is the great difficulty. But according to the Book of Mormon, it seems that the difficulty of the path must be something besides just locating it. In Lehi’s vision, for example, he sees “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” (1 Nephi 8:21). This was not a vain attempt, for Lehi saw “that they did come forth, and commence in the path which led to the tree” (1 Nephi 8:22).

The Lord actually taught that “strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and *few there be that find it*” (Matthew 7:14; emphasis added). Perhaps the Lord was saying that there are few who find the end of the path rather than the beginning of the path. In other words, many may find the strait and narrow path, but few follow it long enough to find eternal life. This concept coincides with the Book of Mormon account of numberless concourses locating the path but losing their direction somewhere along the way. Lehi described this event when he saw that “they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:23).

There must be something about the path being strait and narrow that creates such difficulty for so many that begin their short-lived journey. “That path which leads into the presence of God is . . . strait,” President Joseph Fielding Smith explained, “which means that those who enter into it will find it restricted.”¹⁰ One would assume that all who initially enter the gospel path understand that the life of a disciple will restrict worldly activity. But since that path bisects the “large and spacious field” which Lehi was told is the “world” (1 Nephi 8:9, 20), the distracted gospel disciple would have worldly scenery along the entire way. Such constant distraction undoubtedly weakens faith. When comparing the strait path of the gospel of Christ with the adjacent paths of the world, the gospel path is strait indeed. Unfortunately, those who “know not the ways of the Lord” view the paths of the world as wide freeways without

speed limits or restrictive guidelines. Since the gospel path restricts anything that distracts from the Lord's plan, some see the world's offerings as a multilaned highway of acceptance, tolerance, and diversity. Unfortunately, they fail to see that while the roadway accommodates breadth, it is short on distance. Sure you can change lanes whenever you wish, but you never actually seem to get anywhere.

Some may think that there is little or no need to consider what implications the term narrow might have since many consider strait and narrow to be synonymous. While strait describes the restriction or rejection of worldliness, narrow seems to align itself not so much with the rigidity of the path but the width of the path. Apparently the gospel path narrows as one gets closer to the kingdom. Of course there is plenty of room for gospel travelers but not much room for anything else. "They cannot take with them that which does not apply, or which does not belong to the kingdom of God," President Smith explained. "All such things must be left behind when we enter into this narrow way which leads into the presence of God, where we can receive life eternal."¹¹ When speaking of the narrowness of the way at another time, Christ encouraged one young rich man to sell his worldly possessions and instead seek for heavenly treasure (see Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 18:22–23). Laden with worldly baggage, this young man could not "fit" on the narrow path. Like Esau of old, who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage, this young man lost his divine inheritance just so he could keep his earthy possessions and attitudes. Thus, Christ reminded the disciples that the narrowness of the path was like passing through the "eye of a needle" (Matthew 19:24), where only the unfettered traveler could enter.

No wonder Laman and Lemuel and all those who have self-indulgent appetites balk when it comes to walking the gospel path. A path that requires submission, sacrifice, and hard work will be far too "strait" and too "narrow" for their tastes. Thus, they gravitate toward a building described as "great and spacious" (1 Nephi 8:26) which has plenty of room for their own philosophies, temporal validations, self-indulgences, vain imaginations, and worldly possessions.

At a glance, this building may seem to have it all. But upon closer inspection, it lacks a foundation (see 1 Nephi 8:26). As a result, its inhabitants are “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness” (Ephesians 4:14). It is only a matter of time before such top-heavy structures crumble and experience an exceedingly great fall (see 1 Nephi 12:35). In contrast, the simple sojourner presses forward on a path unaffected by mocking insults, scorning fingers, or enticements of the world. Since the path is laid on a rock-solid foundation (see Helaman 5:12), and because there is no room for worldly baggage, disciples press forward with an eye single to meeting their Savior.

THE ROD OF IRON—
HOLDING FAST TO THE WORD OF GOD

Finally, we come to the most familiar part of Lehi’s vision: the rod of iron. After urging and failing to get Laman and Lemuel’s attention, Lehi saw a rod of iron that “extended along the bank of the river” and “came along” the path “even to the tree” (1 Nephi 8:19–20). The geographical description Lehi gives of the rod of iron is important as it lends to a fuller understanding of the purposes of the rod.

Lehi first described the rod as extending “along the bank of the river” (1 Nephi 8:19), which was later described as being filthy and treacherously deep (see 1 Nephi 15:26–29; 16:16). It was so treacherous, in fact, Lehi saw that “many were drowned in the depths of the fountain” (1 Nephi 8:32), and Nephi went as far as to call the river “the depths of hell” (1 Nephi 12:16). This hazard threatened to engulf weary and unsuspecting travelers as well as those who became lost in the mists of darkness or even those who, like Laman and Lemuel, willingly chose another way. Yet the rod of iron was placed as if it were a fence marking a boundary. “Between the river bank and the path was a rod of iron,” President Lee taught, “presumably to safeguard the travelers from falling off the narrow path into the river.”¹² Standing between the filthy river and the gospel

path (see 1 Nephi 8:19–20) and marking the boundary between safety and peril, the rod keeps those pressing toward the tree safe regardless of the conditions at the time.

Nephi was told that the rod was, in truth, the “word of God” (1 Nephi 11:25), being both the written standard scriptural works and the messages of authorized servants speaking by the power of the Holy Ghost (see D&C 68:2–4). Therefore, in view of Lehi’s dream, the word of God marks the boundary of safety and acts as a fence to protect us from the filth and destruction of the world. “Whoso would hearken unto the word of God,” Nephi expounded, “and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction” (1 Nephi 15:24).

Another important geographical insight concerning the rod of iron is that it runs parallel to the path of the gospel. Because of its companion proximity, the rod acts as a handrail to those forging ahead on the gospel path. Just as one takes calculated steps and firmly grasps a handrail while navigating steep stairs, so too will those on the gospel path cling to the word of God. Disciples find that the word of God can, as Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “give us needed rock-like steadiness, especially in this latter-day, topsy-turvy world in which ‘all things are set in commotion’ (D&C 45:25; 88:91).”¹³

Besides providing a steady influence for the gospel traveler, the rod of iron also provides constant guidance. President Lee taught: “If there is any one thing most needed in this time of tumult and frustration, when men and women and youth and young adults are desperately seeking for answers to the problems which afflict mankind, it is an ‘iron rod’ as a safe guide along the straight path on the way to eternal life, amidst the strange and devious roadways that would eventually lead to destruction and to the ruin of all that is ‘virtuous, lovely, or of good report.’”¹⁴ The guiding influence of the word of God gives clear direction throughout the journey to the tree. Lehi saw how the word of God provided protection, support, and direction to those clinging to the rod, especially when engulfed by mists of darkness or when ridiculed and scorned by the proud

patrons of the world. Those who hold fast to the handrail of the gospel path are encouraged to press forward, for the words of Christ “tell you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:3).

It becomes clear that the rod of iron was not provided as something to lean against while catching our breath during an occasional rest stop. Lehi described a group that “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). Notice that success depends not on a momentary grasping the word of God but rather a “clinging” or holding fast until one arrives at the tree. Rather than using the rod as a crutch or even a cane, wise travelers tether themselves to the rod just as seasoned mountaineers belay themselves to sure structures at all times. This constant dependence is life-sustaining just as taking upon nourishment is not an occasional physical demand. With this in mind, we sense why Nephi described our need to be “feasting upon the word of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:20). Consistent feeding, sustained nourishment, or a literal connection to the rod teaches disciples a daily routine. Those tethered to the word of God who press forward with faith, hope, and perseverance realize they must endure to the end to receive eternal life.

By understanding the vital role that the word of God plays in protecting and guiding, it is easy to see why Nephi would be so passionate in his endorsement of the rod. Nephi “did exhort them to give heed unto the word of the Lord; yea, I did exhort them with all the energies of my soul, and with all the faculty which I possessed, that they would give heed to the word of God and remember to keep his commandments always in all things” (1 Nephi 15:25).

CONCLUSION

Although Lehi’s vision of the tree of life is only one chapter long, it contains ample material that not only testifies of Christ but also “tells men what they must do to gain peace in this life and eternal salvation in the life to come” (introduction to the Book of

Mormon). It is clear that the primary object of the vision was to come to the tree, which of course is the representation of “the love of God” (1 Nephi 11:25), or Jesus Christ, and to partake of the fruit thereof. According to President Benson, “The prophet Lehi also saw our day in his great visionary dream of the tree of life.”¹⁵ Since all of us must navigate the large and spacious field of the world with darkness and mist clouding our way, it is fortunate indeed that Lehi’s vision tells us what we must do to accept the Savior’s invitation to “come unto me” (Matthew 11:28).

Rather than emphasizing only one way to come unto the Savior, Lehi’s vision seems to be an examination of complementary threads that can be woven together to make a disciple’s cloth. It is absurd to imagine that one could accept the gospel path without prayer and revelation, prophetic guidance, or the word of God. Likewise, it would be incredulous to think that one could maintain gospel devotion without receiving revelation, heeding the prophet, walking according to the tenants prescribed by the gospel path, and hearkening to the word of God. Unfortunately, there are those who are passionate about the scriptures but ignore or discount the living prophet. Some may be frequent in personal prayer but fail to see the need for the word of God. There are modern Lamans and Lemuels who prefer to “read by the lamp of their own conceit; who interpret by rules of their own contriving; who have become a law unto themselves, and so pose as the sole judges of their own doings”¹⁶ and thus feel that the strait and narrow path of the gospel cramps their style, inhibits their growth, or simply doesn’t fill their needs or desires. In their quest of tallying their personal gain, they fail to realize that they are missing something they cannot even imagine. They forfeit the experience of having their soul being filled with exceedingly great joy (see 1 Nephi 8:12). Such fruit can be harvested only from the true vine, even Jesus Christ.

Those who take advantage of personal revelation; heed the prophets, seers, and revelators; enter the gate and embrace the strait and narrow gospel path; and hearken to the word of God will find peace in this life and eternal salvation in the life to come. With this diligence, faith, and patience, the promise follows, “By and by

ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet, . . . ye shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst” (Alma 32:42).

NOTES

1. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 570.
2. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Gospel Teacher and His Message,” in *Charge to Religious Educators* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 54.
3. Lorenzo Snow, in Conference Report, April 1899, 52.
4. Dallin H. Oaks, “Revelation,” in *Classic Speeches: Volume One* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1994), 201.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 468.
6. Gordon B. Hinckley, interview on *Larry King Live*, 8 September 1998.
7. Harold B. Lee, in Conference Report, October 1970, 152.
8. Lee, in Conference Report, October 1970, 152.
9. Henry B. Eyring, in Conference Report, April 1997, 32.
10. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 13.
11. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 13.
12. Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 350.
13. Neal A. Maxwell, *That Ye May Believe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 185.
14. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places*, 351.
15. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Power of the Word,” *Ensign*, May 1986, 79.
16. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 373.