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What We Learn from Alma’s Messages to His Sons

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The transformation of Alma the Younger from a person “seeking to destroy the church of God” (Alma 36:6) to a spiritually powerful prophet was dramatic and extraordinary. To go from being among the “vilest of sinners” to wishing he could be an angel (Mosiah 28:4; Alma 29:1) so he might speak with even more power demonstrates the absolute effective impact repentance through faith in Christ’s Atonement can have for any individual. Alma’s conversion begins with a frightening appearance of an angel, declaring to Alma in a voice of thunder that if he does not cease his efforts to destroy the Church, he will bring destruction on himself.

Over the years, I’ve heard students say things like, “If an angel appeared to me, I would change, too!” Sometimes they ask the question, “Why doesn’t God send angels to every person, so that everyone will believe and repent?” I would typically respond to such questions by offering an explanation of God’s omniscience, he having a perfect knowledge of what would be best for each of his children. Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained, “Except in miraculous and unusual circumstances, as with Alma, spiritual rebirth is a process. It does not occur instantaneously. It comes to pass by degrees.”¹ Those rare instances

that are so amazing that “they get written up in the scriptures”²² are real, but are not the norm.

President James E. Faust reminded us:

To be instructed by an angel would be a great blessing. However, as Alma taught us, his final and lasting conversion came only after he had “fasted and prayed many days.” His complete conversion came from the Holy Ghost, which is available to all of us if we are worthy. Miraculous events have not always been a source of conversion. For example, when Laman and Lemuel physically mistreated their younger brothers, an angel appeared and warned them to stop. The angel also reassured all of the brothers that Laban would be delivered into their hands. Nephi, on the one hand, believed and claimed the brass plates from Laban. Laman and Lemuel, on the other hand, did not believe, nor did they change their behavior as a result of the angelic visit. As Nephi reminded them, “How is it that ye have forgotten that ye have seen an angel of the Lord?”²³

While Alma does share his remarkable and unique experience that led him to repentance and spiritual rebirth, his advice to his three sons not only offers practical insight into the aspects that are more common to conversion but also demonstrates how a parent can guide youth who are at different levels in their personal spirituality.

As a somewhat private person, I was often a little uncomfortable with Mormon’s inclusion in the Book of Mormon of Alma’s very personal messages to his three sons, Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton. Why would such personal “father to son” communications be included in scripture? Certainly, scripture is not always the transcribed revelations that come from God through living prophets. There are letters, histories, sermons, stories, and other texts that have become sacred through canonization. I remember thinking, “If I were Mormon, I probably would not have inserted these very personal family communications in a book that would eventually go to all the world.” I’ve asked myself why Mormon did include them in his record. Clearly, these chapters in Alma are important to the narrative and contain valuable doctrinal information. However, there may be another reason why these chapters were included in the Book of Mormon.

In hindsight, we know that each of these men was believing and faithful at the end of his life. In Alma chapter 49 all three sons are mentioned as having “been ordained by the holy order of God . . . and sent forth to preach among the people” (Alma 49:30). Helaman became the sacred record keeper, the head of the Church, and an influential prophet. After the death of Helaman, “Shiblon took possession of those sacred things which had been

delivered unto Helaman by Alma. And he was a just man, and he did walk uprightly before God; and he did observe to do good continually, to keep the commandments of the Lord his God; and also did his brother” (Alma 63:1–2). Because Helaman had already died, the person referred to as “his [Shiblon’s] brother” who did good continually and kept the commandments of God was likely Corianton. The last mention of Corianton in the Book of Mormon is that he “had gone forth to the land northward in a ship, to carry forth provisions unto the people who had gone forth into that land” (Alma 63:10).

Because of the knowledge we have of how all of Alma’s sons were faithful at the end of their lives, we may miss that at the time of Alma’s communication with his sons, these three young men may represent different conditions of spiritual development on the way to conversion: valiant, wayward, and perhaps somewhere in between. It is evident that Alma loved his three sons, no matter their level of spirituality or obedience. He desired what was best for them, and he was an inspired parent. Examining the wisdom he imparted to his sons can help us be more sensitive as to how best to approach and advise those who are living lives anywhere on the continuum of spirituality, from those who are living righteously to those who are struggling with serious transgressions.

To put Alma’s messages to his three sons in perspective, the Book of Mormon informs us that Alma and his two younger sons, Shiblon and Corianton, had just “returned to the land of Zarahemla, after having been instruments in the hands of God of bringing many of the Zoramites to repentance” (Alma 35:14). After Alma returned from that mission, he was “grieved for the iniquity of his people, . . . seeing that the hearts of the people began to wax hard, and that they began to be offended because of the strictness of the word” (verse 15). It appears that Alma’s sorrow for the wickedness of the people and his concern for his own sons prompted him to have a private, fatherly conversation with each of the three young men. After stating that Alma’s heart was “exceedingly sorrowful,” the next verse reads, “*Therefore*, he caused that his sons should be gathered together, that he might give unto them every one his charge, *separately*, concerning the things pertaining to righteousness” (verse 16; emphasis added). Alma wrote down what he said to his sons, for “we have an account of his commandments, which he gave them according to his own record” (verse 16).

Helaman

Helaman was Alma's eldest son (see Alma 31:7). Admonitions given to Helaman from his father are found in Alma chapters 36–37. This instruction included a commandment for Helaman to take charge of the sacred records, “keep a record of this people . . . upon the plates of Nephi, and keep all these things sacred” (Alma 37:2). Alma shared with Helaman a detailed account of his own conversion experience, including the visitation of an angel, the pains Alma suffered because of his sins, and the joy he experienced after crying out for mercy to Jesus and being born of God (see Alma 36:8–21).

The instructions Alma gave to Helaman can be seen as the eldest son's calling as Alma's heir to take responsibility for the sacred records and to ultimately replace Alma as the head of the Church. The story of Alma's conversion may have been shared with Helaman because of the many people he would be preaching to who were in need of serious repentance. We are not told why Helaman did not accompany his father and his brothers on the mission to the Zoramites. Perhaps he remained behind already with responsibilities for the family and Church at home.

Because Helaman turned out to be a stalwart in the kingdom, even a prophet of God, we may see Alma's counsel to Helaman simply as the training and instruction he would need as the future leader of the Church. However, there may be another possible reason for Alma's counsel to Helaman that could be considered.

Before issuing the call to Helaman to become the keeper of the sacred records, Alma admonished, “O my son Helaman, behold thou art in thy youth, and therefore, I beseech of thee that thou wilt hear my words and learn of me; for I do know that whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions, and shall be lifted up at the last day” (Alma 36:3). Alma's instructions to Helaman included his witness and his own personal experience. In more detail than when the story is related earlier in the Book of Mormon, Alma recounted his hell-like ordeal that ultimately led him to faith in Jesus Christ.

Alma shared with Helaman the fact that, in his youth, he had been going “about with the sons of Mosiah, seeking to destroy the church of God” (Alma 36:6). He related how a holy angel appeared to them and spoke “as it were the voice of thunder, and the whole earth did tremble beneath our feet; and we all fell to the earth, for the fear of the Lord came upon us” (verse 7). Alma continued his narration, expressing how he felt when he remembered all of his

sins and iniquities. He described feeling “racked with eternal torment” (verse 12) and being “tormented with the pains of hell” (verse 13). He explained to Helaman that in that condition “the very thought of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror” (verse 14). So bad was his torment that he wished that he simply did not exist (see verse 15).

The detail Alma used when speaking to Helaman might have been Alma's way of saying, “This was a terrible ordeal for me—something which you do not have to go through if you have faith in Christ and are obedient to the commandments of God.” Alma continued to share his conversion experience and the joy that came into his soul as he reached out in faith to Jesus Christ and deeply sensed the profound miracle of being forgiven through the Savior's atoning sacrifice. He declared how he could remember his pains no more and was no longer harrowed up by the memory of his sins: “And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!” (verse 20).

After sharing his experience of being born again, Alma expressed his desire that Helaman become the keeper of the sacred records, including the plates of Nephi and the plates of brass. At that point, Alma said to Helaman, “Now ye may suppose that this is foolishness in me; but behold I say unto you, that by small and simple things are great things brought to pass” (Alma 37:6).

Alma was reminding Helaman that some things that might seem unimportant can have significant results. President M. Russell Ballard taught, “We must remember that the purposes of the Lord in our personal lives generally are fulfilled through the small and simple things, and not the momentous and spectacular.”⁴ President Howard W. Hunter stated, “Frequently it is the commonplace tasks we perform that have the greatest positive effect on the lives of others, as compared with the things that the world so often relates to greatness.”⁵

Although positive outcomes can be the result of doing small and simple things, the same can be true of negative consequences. President Ballard wrote: “I was sobered by how small and simple things can be negative and destructive to a person's salvation. A series of seemingly small but incorrect choices can become those little soul-destroying termites that eat away at the foundations of our testimony until, before we are aware, we may be brought near to spiritual and moral destruction.”⁶ President Dallin H. Oaks related his experience of seeing cracks in thick concrete during a morning walk. This cracking was not the result of some large and powerful thrust. “No,

this cracking is caused by the slow, small growth of one of the roots reaching out from the adjoining tree,” he remarked. “The thrusting power that cracked these heavy concrete sidewalks was too small to measure on a daily or even a monthly basis, but its effect over time was incredibly powerful.”⁷

Alma called to Helaman’s attention the priceless value that sacred records had already been for Lehi’s descendants: “And now, it has hitherto been wisdom in God that these things should be preserved; for behold, they have enlarged the memory of this people, yea, and convinced many of the error of their ways, and brought them to the knowledge of their God unto the salvation of their souls” (Alma 37:8).

Alma explained that we may not always know the specifics of what we are called to do, but certainly there is a wise purpose, “which purpose is known unto God” (Alma 37:12). We are reminded of Adam’s response to an angel who inquired as to why he had offered sacrifices unto the Lord for many days. Adam replied, “I know not, save the Lord commanded me” (Moses 5:6). The angel then explained to Adam the purpose and meaning behind the sacrifices he had been commanded to perform. Elder Neal A. Maxwell reminded us, “What we already know about God teaches us to trust him for what we do not know fully.”⁸

Alma was asking Helaman to be obedient without seeing the total picture, exercising faith and trust. Sometimes we might forget that a necessary aspect of faith is the absence of complete knowledge. President Boyd K. Packer taught: “Faith, to be faith, must center around something that is now known. Faith, to be faith, must go beyond that for which there is confirming evidence. Faith, to be faith, must go into the unknown. Faith, to be faith, must walk to the edge of the light, and then a few steps into the darkness. If everything has to be known, if everything has to be explained, if everything has to be certified, then there is no need for faith. Indeed, there is no room for it.”⁹

Alma issued a promise and a warning: “O remember, remember, my son Helaman, how strict are the commandments of God.” He quoted God’s promise: “If ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land—but if ye keep not his commandments ye shall be cut off from his presence” (Alma 37:13).

Alma’s concluding counsel to Helaman included this, “O, remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth; yea, *learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God*” (Alma 37:35; emphasis added). When Alma later instructed Shiblon, he spoke of Shiblon’s righteousness. In Alma’s

admonition to Corianton, he warned him of his sins and the need for repentance. Alma did not mention Helaman’s righteousness nor his sins. He clearly saw Helaman’s potential as the future prophet of the Nephites. However, is it possible that in his youth Helaman was Enos-like in that he had yet to become fully converted to the work of the Lord? This is not to suggest that Helaman had been rebellious or committed serious sins. Rather, like many of our youth in the Church, he may have been obedient to the commandments because of the environment of his home and the influence of his parents. It might be considered a possibility that the young Helaman may have been living on borrowed light. Perhaps his father was trying to help him receive the light of the Spirit for and within himself. Alma’s comments do suggest that Helaman needed encouragement to learn to keep the commandments of God while in his youth.

We know that Helaman *did* receive his personal light and did embrace his father’s counsel because we can follow his life in the pages of the Book of Mormon. We also have a recorded interview between Alma and Helaman sometime after what was recorded in Alma 36–37.¹⁰ This exchange between father and son is found in Alma 45:2–8:

Believest thou the words which I spake unto thee concerning those records which have been kept?
And Helaman said unto him: Yea, I believe.
And Alma said again: Believest thou in Jesus Christ, who shall come?
And he said: Yea, I believe all the words which thou hast spoken.
And Alma said unto him again: Will ye keep my commandments?
And he said: Yea, I will keep thy commandments with all my heart.
Then Alma said unto him: Blessed art thou; and the Lord shall prosper thee in this land.¹¹

Helaman here testified of his own conviction and his willingness to follow the Lord and keep his commandments, evidencing his conversion. The fact that even those who have been totally active in the Church need to be fully converted should be evident by the words of Jesus to Peter, his chief Apostle, before entering Gethsemane: “I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and *when thou art converted*, strengthen thy brethren” (Luke 22:32; emphasis added). In a general conference address, Elder Richard G. Scott quoted President Marion G. Romney as saying:

Conversion is a spiritual and moral change. Converted implies not merely mental acceptance of Jesus and his teachings but also a motivating faith in him and his gospel. A faith which works a transformation, an actual change in one’s understanding

of life's meaning and in his allegiance to God in interest, in thought, and in conduct. In one who is really wholly converted, desire for things contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ has actually died. And substituted therefore is a love of God, with a fixed and controlling determination to keep his commandments. . . . Membership in the Church and conversion are not necessarily synonymous. Being converted and having a testimony are not necessarily the same thing either. A testimony comes when the Holy Ghost gives the earnest seeker a witness of the truth. A moving testimony vitalizes faith. That is, it induces repentance and obedience to the commandments. Conversion is the fruit or the reward for repentance and obedience.¹²

Whether Helaman was faithful, firm, and steadfast from his earliest days or needed to be admonished by his father to become truly converted is not completely clear. What is clear is that many of us raised in the Church have gone through the experience where we were actively involved in the Church from our childhood. However, that involvement may have been mostly because of our family and friends. There came a time when the faith of our parents or siblings was not sufficient as we faced life's questions and challenges. It was then that many of us may have personally sought out the Lord, and then we received strength, understanding, conviction, and light that was no longer borrowed.

Shiblon

Alma's second oldest son, Shiblon, was a model of righteousness. Readers of the Book of Mormon may have noticed that Alma's instructions to Shiblon consist of only one short chapter. This fact has led a number of students to comment, "The better you are, the less your parents have to say to you." This certainly appears to be true when it comes to chastisement and correction.

When considering giving advice to a son or daughter who is and has always been living life on the path of righteousness, what does a parent say? Alma was pleased with Shiblon and expressed the joy he had felt because of Shiblon and the confidence he had for his future.

And now, my son, I trust that I shall have great joy in you, because of your steadiness and your faithfulness unto God; for as you have commenced in your youth to look to the Lord your God, even so I hope that you will continue in keeping his commandments; for blessed is he that endureth to the end.

I say unto you, my son that I have had great joy in thee already, because of thy faithfulness and thy diligence, and thy patience and thy long-suffering among the people of the Zoramites. (Alma 38:2-3)

Notwithstanding Shiblon's past righteousness, Alma understood that just because a person has been living a life pleasing to God, it is not a guarantee that he or she will always remain faithful. Mortality can be incredibly difficult, and our faith can be challenged in many ways.

One thing a parent needs to make clear to a son or daughter who, like Shiblon, has been faithful and diligent is that righteous living does not protect a person from the vicissitudes of life. One can undoubtedly avoid trials that people often bring upon themselves through disobedience. However, righteousness does not protect us from all trials, heartache, sorrow, pain, failure, or other earthly problems. These cannot be avoided because an important part of mortality is learning to overcome challenges and trials, while remaining faithful. Shiblon had exercised patience and long-suffering through the hardships he had faced. There are Church members who have become bitter because of difficult things they have experienced. I've heard people say, "I don't understand it. I did everything right. I kept the commandments and followed the counsel of Church leaders to the letter, and look where that has gotten me!"

Elder Scott reminded us that we will face some adversity because of trials that "a wise Heavenly Father determines is needed even when you are living a worthy, righteous life and are obedient to His commandments. Those trials . . . are evidence that the Lord feels you are prepared to grow more. He therefore gives you experiences that stimulate growth, understanding, and compassion which polish you for your everlasting benefit."¹³

It is sometimes difficult to explain to others or even to yourself why all things don't go the way you want them to go when you have been faithful, obedient, and trusted in God. Simply saying that "it is all part of the plan" may make sense cognitively, but the emotion of suffering what appears to be an injustice often overshadows our understanding of God's plan. Some valuable insights are found in the words of Carlfred Broderick, who reported what he said (as stake president) to a group of young women of the Church:

I do not want you to believe for one minute that if you keep all the commandments and live as close to the Lord as you can and do everything right and fight off the entire priests quorum one by one and wait chastely for your missionary to return and pay your tithing and attend your meetings, accept calls from the bishop, and have a temple marriage, I do not want you to believe that bad things will not happen to you. And when that happens, I do not want you to say that God was not true. Or, to say, "They promised me in Primary, they promised me when I was a Mia Maid, they promised me from the pulpit that if I were very, very good, I would be blessed. But the boy I want doesn't know I exist, or the missionary I've waited for

and kept chaste so we both could go to the temple turned out to be a flake,” or far worse things than any of the above. Sad things—children who are sick or developmentally handicapped, husbands who are not faithful, illnesses that can cripple, or violence, betrayals, hurts, losses—when those things happen, do not say God is not keeping His promises to me. *The gospel of Jesus Christ is not insurance against pain. It is resource in event of pain*, and when that pain comes (and it will come because we came here on earth to have pain among other things), when it comes, rejoice that you have resource to deal with your pain.¹⁴

The gospel of Jesus Christ is our resource when we are in the midst of painful ordeals during mortality. We need to develop trust in God, remembering that our Heavenly Father and our Savior have a perfect love for us. As Elder Scott said, “They would not require you to experience a moment more of difficulty than is absolutely needed for your personal benefit or for that of those you love.”¹⁵

From what he had personally suffered, Shiblon was already very much aware of difficulties and trials a person can experience. Alma acknowledged what Shiblon had gone through: “For I know that thou wast in bonds; yea, and I also know that thou wast stoned for the word’s sake; and thou didst bear all these things with patience because the Lord was with thee; and now thou knowest that the Lord did deliver thee” (Alma 38:4).

Alma reminded Shiblon that it was the Lord that delivered him from these difficult situations, and this prophetic father entreated his son, “Ye should remember, that as much as ye shall put your trust in God even so much ye shall be delivered out of your trials, and your troubles, and your afflictions, and ye shall be lifted up at the last day” (verse 5). Alma confirmed to Shiblon his own reliance on the Lord, telling him that it is the Spirit of God that made things known to him, “for if I had not been born of God I should not have known these things” (verse 6).

Alma then related his personal encounter with the angel and of the “bitter pain and anguish of soul” he suffered for “three days and three nights” (verse 8). Although Alma did not go into nearly as much detail in his version to Shiblon as he did to Helaman, one might wonder why share this experience at all. Shiblon was a committed, faithful, and obedient son—not at all in the state Alma was when the angel was sent to him. Alma had already counseled Shiblon that the person who endures to the end will be blessed. Nevertheless, he knew the nature of fallen man and of the unremitting efforts of the adversary. Alma knew that there was a possibility that his righteous son could leave the path if he lost sight of God’s plan for all of his children.

One concern about faithful, obedient children, which Alma recognized, is the possibility of becoming prideful in their strengths. With pride being “the universal sin,”¹⁶ this situation is a common occurrence. Alma warned Shiblon not to be lifted up unto pride and not to “boast in your own wisdom, nor of your much strength” (verse 11). Yes, Shiblon had been a righteous young man who had borne tribulations with patience and had been diligent in doing the will of God. However, Alma desired that Shiblon understand and remember “that there is no other way or means whereby man can be saved, only in and through Christ” (verse 9). Alma was teaching Shiblon something to this effect: It is vitally important to keep the commandments, serve faithfully, and do works of righteousness, but remember that your own personal righteousness is insufficient to save you. You and I are saved by the works, righteousness, and mercy of Jesus Christ.

President Oaks stated, “Those who engage in self-congratulation over a supposed strength have lost the protection of humility and are vulnerable to Satan’s using that strength to produce their downfall.”¹⁷ Our strengths are gifts from a loving Father in Heaven who preserves us from day to day by lending us breath (see Mosiah 2:21). The sincere acknowledgment of our constant need for God’s help is humility. Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin defined humility as “the recognition and attitude that one must rely on the Lord’s assistance to make it through this life. We cannot endure to the end on our own strength. Without Him, we are nothing.”¹⁸ Nephi certainly understood this principle as he prayed, “O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh” (2 Nephi 4:34). As Robert L. Millet, former dean of Religious Education at BYU, pointed out, “Our hope and trust cannot be in ourselves, no matter how impressive our credentials or how stunning our achievements. We are mortal, and our imperfections and limitations are only too obvious.”¹⁹

Alma also gave this sound counsel to his young missionary son, “Use boldness, but not overbearance; and also see that ye bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love; see that ye refrain from idleness” (Alma 38:12). Alma added another caution about the danger of pride. He told Shiblon to do the right things for the right reasons. Don’t pray so that people will praise you for your wisdom. Don’t think of yourself as being better than the people you are teaching. Remember, we are all sinners and all of us need repentance and

forgiveness. Reach out to the people you teach in love and mercy, because it is the love and mercy of Christ that we all need.

Corianton

There are seventy-seven verses of Alma's admonition to Helaman. Shiblon receives fifteen verses of instruction. Corianton receives ninety-one verses of correction and teaching from his father. Alma is very troubled by the actions of Corianton while he had served as a missionary among the Zoramites and expressed his displeasure, "Now this is what I have against thee; thou didst go on unto boasting in thy strength and thy wisdom" (Alma 39:2). Corianton appears to have been bragging about how strong and wise he was, although he was likely lacking in both strength and wisdom. George Reynolds, long-time secretary to the First Presidency and a member of the First Quorum of Seventy, wrote, "At this period of his life, Corianton appears to have been afflicted with a failing common to youth—an inordinate estimate of his own strength and wisdom, and an inclination to skepticism, if not infidelity."²⁰

Alma's indictment of Corianton's pride is followed by concern: "And this is not all, my son. Thou didst do that which was grievous unto me; for thou didst forsake the ministry, and did go over into the land of Siron among the borders of the Lamanites, after the harlot Isabel" (verse 3).²¹ Trying to impress on Corianton the seriousness of his sins, Alma then asked, "Know ye not, my son, that these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost?" (verse 5).

Alma undoubtedly understood how it felt to be chastised for serious transgressions. He told Corianton, "Would to God that ye had not been guilty of so great a crime" (verse 7). He then gave his reason for this painful rebuke: "I would not dwell upon your crimes, to harrow up your soul, *if it were not for your good*" (verse 7; emphasis added). Alma was speaking from personal experience when he referred to the harrowing up of Corianton's soul, for there had been a time when Alma's "soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree" (Alma 36:12).

It is not an easy thing to be chastened, but it can also be difficult to chasten someone you love, even when moved upon by the Spirit. The Lord has instructed us to reprove "betimes with sharpness, *when moved upon by the Holy Ghost*; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reprov'd, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy" (Doctrine and

Covenants 121:43; emphasis added). Whether we are being reprimanded or the person moved upon by the Holy Ghost to correct someone, we need to remember that love is the motivating factor. "Verily, thus saith the Lord *unto you whom I love, and whom I love I also chasten* that their sins may be forgiven, for with the chastisement I prepare a way for their deliverance in all things out of temptation, *and I have loved you*" (Doctrine and Covenants 95:1; emphasis added).

Unless inspired to do so, there is one aspect of Alma's chastisement of Corianton that might have been unwise. He asked Corianton, "Have ye not observed the steadiness of thy brother, his faithfulness, and his diligence in keeping the commandments of God? Behold, has he not set a good example for thee?" (Alma 39:1). While I have little knowledge in the field of family psychology, I do know how it feels to be compared to a "more righteous" sibling and be asked, "Why can't you be more like . . . ?" Perhaps Alma was inspired to say those very words that Corianton needed to hear.

The fact that Alma did not share his own personal experience and the pain he endured before receiving a remission of his sins is understandable. He shared these things with Helaman and Shiblon so that they might be a help to those in need of repentance and because he wanted them to live in such a way as to avoid a similar ordeal. He stressed Corianton's need to repent, but he did not describe the anguish of soul he and the sons of Mosiah suffered because of their iniquities, likely because he knew that Corianton would have to go through that process himself. Alma did not want to see his son suffer, but he knew that godly sorrow is necessary for true repentance.

Something Alma tells Corianton is haunting to any of us who have ever acted in such a way as to publicly be a bad example of a Latter-day Saint. He says, "O my son, how great iniquity ye brought upon the Zoramites; for when they saw your conduct they would not believe in my words" (Alma 39:11). How serious a sin is it when our actions hurt the testimonies of others or result in people not believing in the gospel of Christ? President Joseph Fielding Smith suggested, "How great shall be our sorrow . . . if through our acts we have led one soul away from this truth."²²

Alma's inspired parenting is evident as he continues his admonitions to Corianton. Notice his discernment in the following verses: "Now my son, here is somewhat more I would say unto thee; *for I perceive that thy mind is worried* concerning the resurrection of the dead" (Alma 40:1; emphasis added). "I have somewhat to say concerning the restoration of which has

been spoken; for behold, some have wrested the scriptures, and have gone far astray because of this thing. And *I perceive that thy mind has been worried* also concerning this thing” (Alma 41:1; emphasis added). “*I perceive there is somewhat more which doth worry your mind, which ye cannot understand*—which is concerning the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner; for ye do try to suppose that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery” (Alma 42:1; emphasis added).

Anyone who has or is raising a child knows that having inspiration as to how to respond to questions or actions of a son or daughter is a tremendous blessing. Without help from the Spirit, a parent can often make judgment errors and do damage, rather than give aid. I shudder as I think back on how I handled some situations with my children, hence, the importance of always having the Spirit, especially when it comes to teaching our children—Heavenly Father’s spirit children.

Corianton had doctrinal concerns and perhaps some misunderstandings. While it is highly doubtful that any person enters the mission field completely prepared in all ways to serve the Lord, Corianton appears to have lacked some basic doctrinal understanding. Or perhaps he understood the doctrine cognitively, but, after committing serious transgressions, he feared the consequences of his actions, not having faith sufficient to apply the doctrines of salvation to his own situation.

Alma’s responses to Corianton’s concerns clarified the doctrine, reinforced the wrongness of Corianton’s actions, and reminded him of the consequences he would face if he did not repent. Corianton’s lack of understanding concerning some doctrinal issues results in our understanding being enhanced, because Alma’s explanation provides answers to many of our own questions and concerns.

Through Alma’s teachings, we learn about the “space between the time of death and the resurrection” (Alma 40:9) known as the spirit world—a state of happiness or a state of misery (verse 15). We learn about the Resurrection and how “the soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul; yea, and every limb and joint shall be restored to its body; yea, even a hair of the head shall not be lost; but all things shall be restored to their proper and perfect frame” (verse 23).

We learn that restoration is not just for the resurrection of spirit and body but, depending on our works and the desires of our hearts, good or bad will also be restored to us, “the one raised to happiness according to his desires

of happiness, or good according to his desires of good; and the other to evil according to his desires of evil” (Alma 41:5). Finally, contrary to the enticements of the adversary, Alma states emphatically, “Wickedness never was happiness.” (verse 10).

Alma explained to Corianton that the meaning of the word *restoration* is not to take something from its natural state and put it in a state opposite to its nature: “The meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous; just for that which is just; merciful for that which is merciful” (verse 13).

Alma perceived Corianton’s understandable concern about judgment and punishment. Guilty of serious sin and possibly not truly understanding the power of Christ’s Atonement, Corianton was pondering the possibility that God is being unjust when a sinner is “consigned to a state of misery” (Alma 42:1). Alma clarified the principle of agency by explaining the condition of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He illuminated the Fall of Adam and Eve and the resultant condition “that our first parents were cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord; and thus we see they became subjects to follow after their own will” (verse 7).

With freedom to choose, but living in a fallen condition, all who reach accountability during their probationary state make unwise decisions. We are all subject to being carnal, sensual, and devilish—a condition of the natural man. For there not to be consequences for our untoward actions would not be just. Our God is a just God. There is no injustice in his nature. However, God is also merciful, though his “plan of mercy could not be brought to pass except an atonement should be made” (verse 15). A loving Father in Heaven, through the atoning sacrifice of His Only Begotten Son, makes this mercy available to all his children who enter into mortality. However, Alma reminded Corianton, this does not mean that everyone is automatically saved. Mercy cannot rob justice. Mercy can, however, overcome justice if agency is exercised wisely by choosing to follow Christ. The Atonement of Christ is in place that we might be saved from our sins, but we cannot use the existence of that atoning sacrifice as a dodge for not putting forth the effort to repent and keep God’s commandments.

Alma knew how important it was, not only to point out Corianton’s need for repentance, but also that he have a clear understanding of the doctrines of Christ’s kingdom. He undoubtedly would have agreed with President

Boyd K. Packer's statement that "true doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior. Preoccupation with unworthy behavior can lead to unworthy behavior. That is why we stress so forcefully the study of the doctrines of the gospel."²³

Understanding true doctrine does not always lead to righteous behavior. We have agency. We are free to choose the path we follow. A righteous beginning does not always lead to an honorable conclusion to mortality. We must endure to the end, and not everyone does. Having a loving parent explain the importance of keeping covenants and putting forth an effort to become Christlike, even sharing personal experiences of learning this the hard way, does not always result in a child deciding to learn wisdom and choose to become a follower of Christ. But, in the case study of Alma and his three sons, there is a happy conclusion.

Helaman was a stalwart in the kingdom, a prophet, a warrior, and the leader of an army of more than two thousand righteous Lamanite young men. Shiblon remained faithful his entire life. We learn in Alma 63 that Shiblon was given the responsibility, after Helaman, to keep the sacred records. Of Shiblon it is recorded, "And he was a just man, and he did walk uprightly before God; and he did observe to do good continually, to keep the commandments of the Lord his God" (Alma 63:2). Corianton repented of his serious transgressions and was called again to serve the Lord. We read that "there was . . . exceedingly great prosperity in the church because of their heed and diligence which they gave unto the word of God, which was declared unto them by Helaman, and Shiblon, and Corianton, and Ammon and his brethren, yea, and by all those who had been ordained by the holy order of God" (Alma 49:30; emphasis added).

As a parent, Alma was consistent in teaching the word of God to his children. His approach in teaching differed based on the needs and situation of each child. Parents usually recognize quickly how different their children are from each other, even though they have the same father and mother and are raised in the same family. There is no one way to raise children that works with every child. Like Alma, we need to customize our instructions, praise, and correction for each child, asking our Father in Heaven for wisdom and guidance. While agency rules out any kind of guarantee of outcome, having the Spirit and handling each situation as the Spirit directs ensures the best chance for the spiritual well-being of our children. **RE**

Notes

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 3:401.
2. Bruce R. McConkie, "Jesus Christ and Him Crucified," in *1976 BYU Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 1977), 399–401.
3. James E. Faust, "A Royal Priesthood," *Ensign*, May 2006, 52.
4. M. Russell Ballard, "Small and Simple Things," *Ensign*, May 1990, 6.
5. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Howard W. Hunter* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), 165.
6. Ballard, "Small and Simple Things," 7.
7. Dallin H. Oaks, "Small and Simple Things," *Ensign*, May 2018, 90.
8. Cory H. Maxwell, ed., *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 350.
9. Boyd K. Packer, *Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 61.
10. Alma's questions to Helaman took place in the nineteenth year of the reign of the judges (see Alma 45:2). Alma's counsel to Helaman found in Alma chapters 36 and 37 appears to have taken place during the seventeenth or eighteenth year of the reign of the judges. According to chapter headings in the Book of Mormon, Alma's interview with Helaman took place about a year after the counsel found in Alma 36–37.
11. One might wonder why Alma would ask these questions if Helaman had been unwavering from the beginning. When issuing the call to keep the sacred records, Alma's comment "You may suppose this is foolishness in me" (Alma 37:6) does sound unusual if Alma had no concerns over Helaman's commitment to the work of the Lord.
12. Marion G. Romney, as quoted by Richard G. Scott, "Full Conversion Brings Happiness," *Ensign*, May 2002, 25.
13. Richard G. Scott, "Trust in the Lord," *Ensign*, November 1995, 16.
14. Carlfred Broderick, "The Uses of Adversity," in *My Parents Married on a Dare* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 122–23, emphasis added.
15. Richard G. Scott, "Trust in the Lord," *Ensign*, November 1995, 17.
16. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2014), 229.
17. Dallin H. Oaks, "Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall," *Ensign*, October 1994, 19.
18. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Press On," *Ensign*, November 2004, 104.
19. Robert L. Millet, *Grace Works* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 47.
20. George Reynolds, *A Dictionary of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Joseph Hyrum Parry, 1891), 98.
21. While the record is not specific about Corianton's actions, most readers and Church leaders have drawn the conclusion that Corianton had been guilty of sexual immorality.
22. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1972), 1:314.
23. Boyd K. Packer, "Little Children," *Ensign*, November 1986, 17.