

STUDY NOTES

Lesson 12: Mosiah Chapters 26-27

*And now for three days and for three nights was I racked, even
with the pains of a damned soul...and
I cried within my heart:
O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me,
who am in the gall of bitterness,
and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.
And now when I thought this,
I could remember my pains no more;
yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.
Alma 36: 18-19*

CONVERTING A RISING GENERATION

The history of God's work among His people has always included the necessity and we might even say, the problem, of converting "the rising generation." Individuals are converted through some spiritual witness that remains the basis of their testimony and activity if they stay true to it. But then converts have children, children who did not experience the conversion experiences of their parents. This is a problem faced by the large group of people converted through Benjamin's powerful address that converted every listener. It was true of the people of Alma who were converted by his teaching at the waters of Mormon. It was true in the early days of the Restoration and it is true in our day. Each generation must have its own conversion experiences. Every branch must abide in the True Vine for itself; it cannot abide in the testimony of a parent, except as a preliminary step on the way to personal conversion.

Our current practice in the church is to baptize children at eight years old. (see D&C 68:25,27) This results in children who are members of the church but sometimes not yet fully converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We teach them diligently at home and at church in the hope that these children of the rising generation will catch fire, and put down their own roots. Because Mosiah 26 speaks of many of their rising generation as refusing to be baptized or join the church (Mos 26:4) it is probable that it was not their custom to baptize at the age of eight. It is hard to imagine an uprising of eight year olds refusing to obey their fathers in a patriarchal society, as that would have been. The only book of Mormon reference on the subject is Mormon's letter to his son on the wrongness of baptizing little children because each person must be capable of repenting. (See discussion in Moroni 8). Mormon says: "Behold I say unto you that this thing shall ye teach—repentance and baptism unto those who are accountable and capable of committing sin; yea, teach parents that they must repent and be baptized, and humble themselves as their little children, and they shall all be saved with their little children." (Moroni 8:10) Whatever the Lord's plan for His church in that particular cultural setting, we know that many of the rising generation refused baptism and membership in the church, which caused grief to the church and to their parents.

TROUBLE IN THE CHURCH

The dissensions of the "rising generation" of young people had a serious effect on the church, for these youth were drawing away others to their unbelieving ways of thinking and causing many converts and even older members to get enmeshed in contention and sin. It appears that some of this younger generation were not content with just staying away from church themselves, but that they actively worked on the faithful, "deceiving many with their flattering words." (Mos 26:6) This caused a whole cascade of serious problems for the church. There were contentions between believers and non-believers, perhaps between fathers and their sons. Some of those who had cried out to King Benjamin—"We have no more disposition to do evil!"—were the very ones now pulled into sinful contentions that finally came to the attention of King Mosiah, for it was disturbing the peace of the kingdom. Generation was fighting against generation, which caused a downward spiral. Some who saw their elders bickering and lacking Christian charity decided the church wasn't what it said it was.

THE LORD INSTRUCTS ALMA

Such serious dissension had not happened before among God's people. Alma was anxious to handle this in a way that was right before the Lord. The first thing he did was go to King Mosiah. The civil authority and religious authority were more or less the same under Mosaic Law¹. Their laws were all one. But Mosiah declines to judge these cases. He decided these wrongdoings were more appropriately handled through church channels than through the civil courts. The distinction he made is similar to that made in our society today, where churches can only discipline by revoking membership privileges.

Now Alma was faced with the question of how to deal with the sins of church members. He was very concerned, and "feared that he should do wrong in the sight of God." (v13) Alma prayed for God's direction. This illustrates one positive meaning of "the fear of the Lord;" "We should we all fear to do wrong in the sight of God and pray to make decisions in our callings that are approved by heaven.

Alma didn't just pray casually for help. He "poured out his whole soul to God." I'm not certain what that means, but I know for sure that his prayer was not rushed, perfunctory or rote. God answered him in 18 remarkable verses that we have a record of because immediately after his prayer Alma wrote down what God told him. Here are the highlights of that answer:

1. Blessed are you Alma for your exceeding faith and because you have established a church of my people who have exceeding faith in your words.
2. You are my servant and I covenant with thee that you shall have eternal life.
3. Those who hear my voice are my sheep. These are the ones you should receive into the church for they are the ones who are willing to bear my name.
4. If they know me, they will also receive eternal life, for they shall come forth and have a place eternally at my right hand.
5. At the judgment day, those who did not know me will also come forth and stand before me and realize that they chose not to be redeemed. All those who heard me and knew me were forgiven for their sins "as often as they would repent." Those who will not hear my voice should not be in my church.
6. If someone confesses their sins and repents, then they are forgiven and may stay in my church. Those who do not confess and repent are not mine, and should have their names removed from my church.
7. There is one important condition for forgiveness from the Lord. Those who profess my name must forgive others if they want to receive forgiveness. If they do not forgive others they will not be forgiven themselves.

Considering carefully all the words the Lord spoke to Alma we can see that God wants His people to be in relationship with Him, hearing His voice and responding to His call to them in faith. When they sin, they have only to confess and repent and they will be forgiven—every time! But they must remember how great the Lord's mercy is to them and extend this same gift of merciful forgiveness to others or they will not be able to draw on the Lord's Mercy Bank. You might say the proof that they remember how great and merciful a thing the Lord has done for them is that they extend the same mercy to others.

BLOTTED OUT

The solution to Alma's problem with unrepentant sinners in the church is that their names are to be removed from the church rolls. In other words, they are excommunicated. How shocking to realize that these are the very same people who cried out to King Benjamin, "We have no more dispensation to do evil!" (Mos 5:2) But remember that King Benjamin had many warnings for them. He said, "I would that ye should remember that this is the name that I said I should give unto you that never should be blotted out, except it be through transgression; therefore, take heed that ye do not transgress, that the name be not blotted out of your hearts." (Mos 5:11) It is no coincidence that Alma's description of what happens to the unrepentant members is that "those that would not confess their sins and repent of their iniquity, the same were not numbered among the people of the church, and their names were blotted out." (Mosiah 26:36)

ALMA THE YOUNGER

Central to the Book of Mormon is the story of Alma the younger and the sons of Mosiah being rebuked by an angel and becoming converted. The story as it is found in Mosiah 27 puts together many of the major themes of the book: the bondage of sin; the freeing power of the atonement of Jesus Christ; the role of faith, fasting and prayer; repentance, redemption and the new birth; and finally, the changed character of the lives of those who become servants of the Son of God. Because of this experience Alma

¹ Which is why the Pharisees felt justified in calling for Jesus' death for "working" on the Sabbath, which is what they considered his healings to be.

became a mighty prophet whose impact on Nephite history was immense. Because of the conversion of the sons of Mosiah, none of them is willing to become the next king. Thus Nephite history is changed again and the reign of the judges begins.

DELIVERANCE

When Book of Mormon prophets speak of sin, they talk about it in terms of "bonds of iniquity" or "chains of death." Let's try and understand the connection. First, consider the examples of bondage we have from the scriptures and from history. Some examples: the children of Israel in slavery to Pharaoh, African slavery in the US and other countries in the 19th century, the people of Alma and Limhi in bondage to the Lamanites, the Jews in concentration camps in WWII, Japanese Americans in internment camps in the US during WWII, and the millions of slaves still held in many countries of the world today. (see www.antislavery.org)

Those who were or are slaves in these examples know that they are slaves. Their lives are not their own; the conditions they live under are usually harsh, even cruel. Bondage as a metaphor is meant to teach us about the links created by sin that tie the sinner inexorably to Satan. Those who sin are the beloved spirit children of God. Nevertheless, as they sin they are locked into patterns of thinking and behaving that restrict their spiritual growth and take them further and further from the God who loves them. But unlike the slaves in the historical examples just cited, they don't know that the links of their chains are being formed.

Those in bondage to sin often do not have any idea that they are in a form of slavery. This was Alma the younger's case. Mosiah 27 reveals that Alma was a "very wicked and idolatrous man." He was also a man of "many words" and he "[stole] away the hearts of many people." (Mos 27:8) In his own mind he saw himself as quite free, especially free from the requirements of the standards and principles taught in the religion of his father, a religion he mocked and detested. That is the interesting thing about slavery to sin. Those in bondage to sin often think that they are the free ones.

But the truth is we all serve some master. We have a choice of masters, but we do not have the choice of making our own moral laws; that is, choosing behavior but not accepting the natural consequences that inevitably come with that behavior. A person, in other words, cannot choose to smoke and not have his lungs affected by that smoke. That strikes us as obvious. But it is not. The smoke may not manifest its damage for years. In the 1930's Hollywood portrayed smoking as glamorous and magazine ads promoted it as healthful. Nevertheless, forty years later, smokers who believed these lies developed lung cancer.

Just so, the adulterer may have a thousand rationalizations about why his choice is a good one, but the soul disease that results from such actions will be manifest in the end. Today we know the truth about smoking, but how many other sinful habits are we fooling ourselves about? Those who break the Sabbath or let worldliness into their lives from R-rated movies, too much TV or time wasting, may feel no immediate negative results. That, of course, is the way Satan works. It was a much older and wiser Alma who taught his own children, "Wickedness never was happiness." (Alma 41:10) The gospel plan is a plan of perfectly just payback. That payback comes ultimately at death, when "they reap their rewards according to their works, according to the spirit which they listed to obey." (Alma 3:26) Freedom from the just consequences of the many sins we are heir to through the flesh comes only through the power of Jesus Christ. He alone can free us from the compulsive habits that keep us in bondage. And only with His help can we even see the truth about our chains.

The scriptures are clear about what the wages are that we will receive. "The wages of sin is death. But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23) In King Benjamin's speech he said a similar thing. He said whoever chooses to obey the evil spirit and remains and dies in their sins, "drinketh damnation to his own soul: for he receiveth for his wages an everlasting punishment, having transgressed the laws of God contrary to his own knowledge." (Mosiah 2:33) Alma had been taught the laws of God. He may have told himself these teachings were foolish, narrow, puritanical and close-minded. This is the usual set of accusations against a religion which teaches that God has authority to issue commands to mankind. But all the sophisticated mockery in the world does not prevent the devil from getting his due. He "owns" those who serve him and "the devil will not support his children at the last day." (Alma 30:60)

When Alma and the sons of Mosiah have their encounter with a mighty angel, they are brought face to face with the kind of truth that cannot be rationalized away or denied or hidden from. It is interesting to contemplate that everyone who chooses to sin or break covenants for some supposed benefit it will bring, will have a similar confrontation with Truth at some point. Alma describes his own experience in this way: "I was racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with

all my sins. Yea, I did remember all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell; yea, I saw that I had rebelled against my god, and that I had not kept his holy commandments." (Alma 36:12-13) Each and every unrepentant sinner has a similar experience waiting for him or her.

OH, WHAT JOY

Alma's experience with the angel and his inner spiritual turmoil left him helpless, like one in a coma. He didn't speak or move for three days and nights² while his faithful father and some of the priests of the church fasted and prayed. His father "rejoiced" because he knew that God was acting and that good would come of it. He gathered the people around so they also would see "what the Lord had done."

What God did was turn Alma's world upside down. First Alma saw the truth of what he had done. He had sinned against God and all his rationalizations and excuses and reasons were no more than sand. He felt the full weight of his sin and it crushed him. When he retells the experience to his own sons years later he says he was "racked with torment, even with the pains of a damned soul." (Alma 36:16) But his next statement should give encouragement to every parent of a prodigal, for he says he remembered his father's teachings about Christ and his "mind caught hold upon this thought." In the midst of hell one thought came like a lifeline of hope—Jesus Christ was coming to save sinners. He reached out. "O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death." (Alma 36:19)

This is a prayer Jesus will always answer. Note that Alma doesn't say, "Oh God, please bless me because my father is the prophet and I have lived an exemplary life." He has very few bargaining chips at this point. But he is humble. He is repentant. And now he believes what his father taught about Jesus Christ. All the tumblers are in line and the lock opens. Forgiveness comes, not because of worthiness, but because the sinner's cry for mercy is answered by the mercy of the One who suffered and died for sinners. Alma's sins are forgiven. When God forgives a sinner, at the moment of true repentance, that person is completely clean. A clean vessel can then be filled with the Holy Ghost, the gift that allows God to come into our souls and be a light and comfort within. This is how He "abides in us" as He promised (Moses 6:34). It is also the thing that brought Alma the powerful emotions he describes in Alma 36:20-21. "And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold! There can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy."

BORN AGAIN, AGAIN

For the second time in Mosiah, the first being King Benjamin's address, we come upon the doctrine of being *born again*. While Alma's body was in a coma like state, his spirit was having the spiritual experience he describes in Mosiah 27:23-31.³ While apparently unconscious to those around him, he hears the Lord speak to him. The two verses, Mosiah 27:25 & 26, contain the Lord's words summarizing the necessity for the entire world, every man and woman, every nation and kindred, to have a spiritual rebirth. We are also given a summary definition of what the new birth is: it is being changed from a carnal and fallen state to a redeemed state in which men and women become new creatures, sons and daughters of Christ, who have received the Holy Spirit by the grace of God to empower their new life.

The truest evidence that the change Alma underwent was real and lasting is to be found in what he did immediately after his conversion. Together with the four sons of Mosiah, Alma began at once to try and undo the damage he had done to the church. He traveled throughout the land tirelessly, "publishing" what Christ had done for him and bearing testimony of God's power to redeem. This courageous witness suddenly put Alma and company on the other side of the street, so to speak, and they began to suffer the persecution and scorn that they had once heaped on believers. This hardly stopped them. They only testified the more, openly confessing their past sins, and teaching from the scriptures the words of the prophets. "And thus they were instruments in the hands of God in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth, yea, to the knowledge of their Redeemer. And how blessed are they! For they did publish peace; they did publish good tidings of good; and they did declare unto the people that the Lord reigneth." (Mos 27:36-37)

² Alma 38: 8 "I was three days and three nights in the most bitter pain and anguish of soul." The Mosiah account speaks of two days.

³ He later recounts the story to his sons as recorded in Alma 36 and Alma 38.