

STUDY NOTES

Lesson 9: Mosiah Chapters 18-20

*Behold, ye are little children
and ye cannot bear all things now;
ye must grow in grace and in the knowledge of the truth.
D&C 50: 40*

THINKING ABOUT GRACE

Before we speak of grace in the Alma story in Mosiah, let's take a moment to discuss grace as a theoretical construct. We Mormons sometimes have a hard time thinking and talking about "grace." Let's just admit it. It sounds, well, evangelical or something¹. It is interesting to look back at how Joseph Smith referred to grace. Here is a sentence from the preface to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon: "Wherefore, to be obedient unto the commandments of God, I have, *through his grace and mercy*, accomplished that which he hath commanded me respecting this thing." Notice that the reference to grace is almost a throw away line. Grace isn't explained; it is assumed to be something that his audience understands. If you think about it, every adult member of the church in Joseph's day was a convert, raised up in some other Christian church where the topic of grace was a common and familiar subject.

If a dolphin kept a diary, he wouldn't spend much time writing about water. Water would just be assumed. In our own journals, we don't write about opening doors, backing out of garages or waiting at stoplights. No one talks about the things that are assumed to be in everyone's common experience. In the early days of the church Mormon thinkers tended to write about what was new and different in Mormon theology, like three degrees of glory or a new understanding of the nature of God, not what was commonly understood by everyone. The unintended side effect was that eventually grace was neglected and found herself sitting in a dark corner, like a shy girl at a school dance. Her flashier companions got all the attention. It is time to bring her out of the corner and get to know her. There is surely no more winning and lovely doctrine in all the cannon of truth revealed than the doctrine of God's freely given grace.

Also, by not bringing up the subject, we appear to the rest of the Christian world to be avoiding or worse, *rejecting* the doctrine of grace. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the revelations that Joseph received (*The Doctrine and Covenants*) or translated into English (*The Book of Mormon* and *Pearl of Great Price*), there are forty-four references to grace. Many of these scriptures are beautiful and powerful additions to what the Bible has to say on the subject and are certainly worthy of our study and appreciation. The doctrine of grace is absolutely fundamental to the Book of Mormon's presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

DEFINING GRACE

If you want to understand the basic meaning of a word there are certain key steps to follow. First, you look in a good dictionary that traces the meaning of the word over time, as meanings shift and change. Then, if you are able, it is helpful to look at the Greek and Hebrew words that are translated into the English word "grace" in the Bible. Finally, to understand a doctrine in its completeness, you must read all that God has said about it in His scriptures. Piece by piece, in this way, the picture is fitted together until you have a complete understanding of what the Lord wants us to understand by a certain word or concept.

So, we start with the dictionary. Grace, according to dictionaries from the OED to Webster's, is the granting of favor, love or mercy towards another, especially from a superior to an inferior. In a religious setting this has historically meant God granting His unmerited favor to mankind. Unmerited refers to the fact that man is not entitled to God's gift by law or right, but rather that God is granting favor to him. A secondary meaning associated with this is grace as God's spirit or gift operating within a person to strengthen or enable them. This is the meaning emphasized in the frequently quoted excerpt from the LDS Bible Dictionary on Grace that calls it an "enabling power." The LDS dictionary agrees with the other dictionaries that grace comes from "the bounteous mercy and love of Jesus Christ." If something is earned it cannot strictly be called a gift or favor; it is rather a salary or payment. But as we saw forcibly in King Benjamin's address to his people, God is never in our debt. His gifts are not *owed* to us but *graciously* given.

The Greek word most commonly translated "grace" in the New Testament is *charis* (khar'-ece). This word comes from the root word *chairo*, which denotes graciousness, favor, liberality, joy, benefit, gift, etc. It is related to the word *charisma* meaning "gift". We say a person is "charismatic" or has "charisma" when they

¹ Robert Millet, former dean of the Religion faculty at BYU, tells of growing up a lonely Mormon boy in Louisiana where he attended a parochial school. One day he came home and asked his father if they believed in grace. "No," his father replied. "Why not?" asked his son. "Because the Baptists do."

attract others because of their many gifts. In the Old Testament, the word is found most often in the phrase "to find grace in [someone's] sight [or eyes]." The Hebrew word is *chen* and comes from the primitive root *chanan*, meaning "to bend or stoop in kindness to an inferior; to favor." So we read that "Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord." (Gen 6:8)

One simple way of understanding the concept is to think of "mercy" as not getting something that you do deserve ("Oh Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner" Luke 18:13), and "grace" as getting some good thing that you do not deserve ("The Lord God showeth us our weakness that we may know that it is by his grace, and his great condescensions unto the children of men, that we have power to do these things." (Jacob 4:7) If we only think of grace as an "enabling power" we will miss a crucial point about it. For all power is essentially enabling power. Electricity is a power that enables one to light rooms and turn on computers. Priesthood power enables men to give blessings and baptize. Political power enables one to get things done in a state.

All God's gifts *enable* us, of course, to do many things. However, we must not miss the essentially un-earned nature of His grace. God has given to us that which we don't deserve and haven't earned, because of His great love and mercy. We cannot earn grace.² We must *qualify* for it by believing in Christ, repenting, and humbly asking for it; but these things that we do hardly equal in value the return on our "investment of faith." "Are we not all beggars?" Benjamin asks us. A beggar knows perfectly well that he is not "owed" what he begs for. He begs hoping for kindness. Because we know God's goodness, we can go "boldly to the throne of grace" as Paul says, "knowing that God is touched with the feeling of our infirmities." (Hebrews 4:15-16)

That is why Lehi says "Wherefore, how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah." (2 Nephi 2:8) The same thought is expressed in 2 Nephi 25:23, a familiar scripture often turned on its head to mean the very opposite of what it does mean: "For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do." Some mistakenly think this scripture means that God doesn't begin to help us until we have done all that is humanly possible, but if this is true we are all in big trouble for who has done all that they can?

Thankfully, it means no such thing. Move the phrases around slightly and the meaning becomes clear and consistent with all other scriptures on the subject: "After all we can do, it is by grace we are saved." "After all" here has the sense of "despite" or "in spite of all."³ Men and women can certainly do much on their own power, but despite "all we can do" we cannot conquer death or change our hearts and fill them with the gifts of the Spirit like charity, patience and joy. We cannot make ourselves celestial beings. We are fully dependent on the grace of God, "after all we can do."

GRACE IN MOSIAH

The eighteenth chapter of Mosiah is a peaceful interlude in the action. This chapter is set in a kind of sacred grove, a place they called Mormon, described as a "thicket of small trees" near a "fountain of pure water." In this tranquil setting, a new church is born. Alma, the former wicked priest, has "repented of his sins and iniquities" (Mos 18:1) and has made amends for his former lifestyle by spreading the glad tidings of God's word as he learned them from the prophet Abinadi. It is likely Abinadi died believing that his mission to bring repentance to the people of Noah had failed. But in this one chapter we are able to trace the amazing success that actually came of his preaching. The chapter begins with one humbled, repentant man and in its last verse, reveals that four hundred and fifty souls were brought into the new church Alma begins!

Perhaps it is in this setting that the grace we have tried to define can be clearly seen. The little grove is filled with repentant sinners desiring to change their ways because of newfound faith in God. In response to their faith we see God's gifts being poured out. It is like a spiritual Christmas morning, with the children of God "clapping their hands for joy" at the gifts that are raining down upon them. Three times the author uses the phrase "pour out" referring to the abundance of the Holy Spirit that they were praying would shower down upon them. In fact, the image of the people coming up out of the water, drenched and dripping with the pure water of their newly made covenants and also being filled with the Spirit of God that was poured out upon them, is a joyous picture of the gifts of Christ available to believers. It reminds us of a similar occasion when King Benjamin's people covenanted with Christ and were "filled with joy." (M 4:3)

BAPTIZED AND FILLED

On the first day that Alma baptizes himself and "about two hundred and four" other souls, we read that they were "baptized in the waters of Mormon, and were filled with the grace of God." (M 18:16) This seems to be a synonym for the Spirit of God, for Alma has prayed in his baptismal prayer, asking "may the

² Just by way of an interesting fact—the word "earn" is not found in the scriptures—ever. Eternal Life is always said to be "inherited."

³ Even the dictionary meaning of the idiomatic phrase "after all" is given as "nevertheless," or "despite." *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*

spirit of the Lord be poured out upon you..." Thus we see that the first gift that God gave his newly adopted children was the Spirit, which is the essential gift that precedes all others.

Clearly the newly minted saints of this chapter do not receive the Spirit because they "earned" it or "deserved" it. They qualified to receive it because they had faith in Alma's teachings about the redemption of Christ offered to them through His atoning sacrifice, humbly sought forgiveness of their sins and covenanted to obey Him and be bound in love to their fellow saints from that point forward. They were able to receive grace because of their faith and humility, but they did not "merit or earn" it by having kept a laundry list of laws and performances. In fact, they were probably all familiar with and observant to some degree of the Law of Moses, which their priests claimed to teach. It was the understanding of their need for Christ's atoning sacrifice that was new to them. Here we can clearly see the correct order of things in God's economy. First the Spirit is poured out on the humble and faithful covenant children of God, and then, by this gift of grace, they are equipped to do the good works that inevitably follow.

PRIESTCRAFT VS FAITHFUL PRIESTS

Alma had been one of Noah's appointed priests, a questionable distinction to have on your resumé. As a group these men were takers, selfish "fleece" of the flock who used their positions to amass personal wealth and spend their time in pleasure seeking. They were immoral and dissolute and could not have set a worse example for the people. After Alma is converted, he realizes deeply how different the teachers of the new church must be in order to properly lead the people of God. He chooses men and ordains them "having authority from God," choosing one man for every fifty members of the church. They are to teach and preach what Alma had taught them, along with the words "spoken by the mouth of the holy prophets." Leaving nothing to chance, Alma reiterates that they are to teach "nothing save it were repentance and faith on the Lord, who had redeemed his people." Then, as a barrier against the dangers of priestcraft, which he had seen so vividly under Noah's leadership, he commands the new priests to "labor with their own hands for their support." (M 18:24) This is the system of leadership we have in place in our modern church and by its implementation the temptation to "market" the gospel and get rich in the bargain is fortunately avoided.

GOD'S PAYMENT SYSTEM

Rather than receive a salary for serving in the church, we read that the priests received "the grace of God" for their labors, "that they might wax strong in the Spirit, having the knowledge of God, that they might teach with power and authority from God." (M 18:26) Which would you rather have? Those who seek worldly riches for their service in God's name are those of whom the Lord spoke when he said, "Verily, I say unto you, they have their reward." (Matt 6:2) Because they wanted money, money is all they got. But the true priests were those who loved the saints and were willing to work hard for the privilege of teaching and serving. Because of their pure intent God was able to pour out his grace, or gifts upon them. The particular gifts listed here are impressive: knowledge of God, power and authority in their teaching, and being strong in the Spirit.

The phrase is used, "wax strong in the Spirit." Think of the old fashioned way of making candles through the process of repeatedly dipping string wicks into liquid wax. Each dip adds to the candle another layer until it is fully formed. Learning and growing in the Spirit is just such a "dipping" process. Each time we are immersed in the influence of God's spirit, by taking the sacrament, reading His word, attending the temple, praying sincerely, singing or listening to spiritually uplifting music, serving in love, etc., we come away with another coat of the spirit, thickening and strengthening our spiritual core. We are "waxing strong in the Spirit" and building the reserves that will serve us when we are called upon to face temptations or challenges. The danger of sin is that it sears the spirit and those carefully built up layers of God's spirit melt and drip away, leaving us unprotected. For this reason King Benjamin ended his famous speech with warnings to "watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, and continue in the faith of God." (Mos 4:30)

It seems that all one has to do to be set upon the straight and narrow path to God is to have faith in the name of Jesus Christ, and enter the gate by baptism, and one is then given the joyous gifts of God—the Spirit and all other things that God knows you will need in your journey. But there is an important caveat. Once on the path, you cannot just sit down where you are and wait to die, assured of your place in the kingdom of God. You must keep moving forward, clinging to the rod of iron. We see many new converts rejoice in their newfound faith, but then basically "sit down" soon after baptism, and became easy prey for the enemy. John 15 teaches, "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. (v2)" Do nothing and we will find ourselves on the rubbish heap, a branch that turned out to be useless to the Master. Go forward in faith and you will find the Lord pruning you (ouch!) that you might become ever more fruitful and useful to Him in His kingdom. Grace is free, meaning we cannot earn it, but it is not easy, meaning that following the path of faith and the grace that attends faith, is no guaranty of ease or trouble free living. In fact, God's gifts seem strangely designed to lead us into one difficult spot after another. ("But Bishop, I've never taught a class in my life!") The natural man in us may want to take it easy, but God wants to make us mighty.

BACK TO REAL LIFE

Which means that the idyllic interlude in the place called Mormon cannot continue indefinitely. King Noah discovers the movement of people that constitute Alma's new church and sends an army after them, necessitating their escape into the wilderness. The place called Mormon becomes a beautiful memory, one that causes the writer (probably Alma quoted later by Mormon) to break into a kind of poetic song: "All this was done in Mormon, yea, by the waters of Mormon, in the forest that was near the waters of Mormon; yea, the place of Mormon, the waters of Mormon, the forest of Mormon, how beautiful are they to the eyes of them who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer; yea, and how blessed are they, for they shall sing to his praise forever." (M 18:30) Their hearts must have returned many times to this precious memory.

Mosiah 19 returns to narrative action. The plot moves quickly. Fed up with the wickedness of the King, Gideon seeks to slay him, but is prevented by an approaching Lamanite attack. After the dust settles, King Noah is dead, killed by his own people, his son Limhi is king, the wicked priests have escaped by hiding in the wilderness and the people (who are, remember, ex-pats from Zarahemla who decided two generations back to return to their original homeland in the land of Nephi) are in a worse state of bondage to the Lamanites than ever, owing them half of all they have. Nevertheless, for two years they live this way in peace.

In the next chapter, the plot thickens. The wicked priests of Noah have been in hiding, afraid to return to their homes because they know the people would put them to death as they did King Noah. Nevertheless, they miss the comforts of home, home-cooked meals, etc. One day they happen upon an apparent solution, at least one that would appeal to a bunch of dastardly villains. They find some young Lamanite women dancing in the woods. In a fashion consistent with their character, they surprise the girls and carry off one apiece to be their wives. An alarm is raised and their countrymen, the Lamanites, quickly attack the cities of the innocent Nephites, who are unaware of the reason for the attack. They fight back bravely and manage to fend off the first wave of Lamanites. Afterwards they discover the wounded Lamanite king on the field of battle. When he is brought before King Limhi, the Nephite king indignantly demands to know why the Lamanites have broken their oath and attacked.

That is a reasonable question since these people took oaths very seriously. The Lamanite king recites the story of the missing girls. King Limhi assures him that if any of his people are guilty of such a crime, he will make sure they are punished. Gideon then comes forward with the solution to this puzzle. It is the missing priests of King Noah who have been hiding in the wilderness who are surely the culprits. The Lamanite king shows himself to be an honorable man. He believes Limhi and Gideon and agrees to plead their case before his own armies. When the next wave of Lamanite soldiers approach, they are pacified by their king, who comes out at the head of the Nephites, who are not bearing weapons but are appealing to the mercy and sense of fairness of their enemies. "When the Lamanites saw the people of Limhi, that they were without arms, they had compassion on them and were pacified towards them, and returned with their king in peace to their own land." (M 20:26)

Thus we leave these chapters with one more instance of the grace of God. This time, God's help is shown by His providential actions in their behalf. Think of the things that worked in favor of the Nephites. If the King had been killed, or if he had escaped with the first army, things would have been tragically worse for the Nephites. If the Lamanite king had not believed them, or if Gideon had not been the sharp and pro-active leader that he was, things again would have been tragically worse for them. If the hearts of the Lamanite armies had not been softened when they confronted the unarmed Nephites, they would have been slaughtered. Here is a time when God is giving his humbled people a gracious gift of deliverance by acting in their behalf in a "behind the scenes" manner. There is no parting of the Red Sea, but there is certainly a rescue wrought by the Almighty. This brings to mind an Old Testament scripture from the Book of Ezra: "And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage. For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia [of the Lamanites]." (Ezra 9:8-9) Let us never forget the gracious gifts of God that surround us everyday, even though God does not always sign the card on His gifts. To quote King Benjamin, "Ye are eternally indebted to your Heavenly Father to render to him all that you have and are." (M 2:34)