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The Book of Mormon: Helaman's "Stripling Soldiers"

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Guide Lessons for December

LESSON 1

Theology and Testimony

(First week in December)

BOOK OF MORMON: HELAMAN'S "STRIPLING SOLDIERS"

Assignment

This lesson covers the *Book of Alma* from chapters fifty-three to the end, including chapter fifty-three. In the latest edition of the *Book of Mormon* it covers twenty-eight pages. Since the greater part of the history recorded here either relates directly to the activities of two thousand young Ammonite soldiers or grows out of those activities, we have chosen to center the lesson in this remarkable group of boys.

The Story

The story is as follows, briefly told:

The people of Ammon, as they were called, chafed under the fact that they had covenanted never to take up arms against their fellows. Yet their adopted country was in peril from the Lamanites. If it had not been for the persuasions of the Nephite leaders, they would have broken that covenant and joined the army.

But since that covenant was entered into, a new generation of men had grown up. The way out was therefore clear. These young men, of whom there were two thousand.

*Through a mistake the first lesson for this year was given as beginning with chapter 37 of Alma. It should have been chapter 29. This matter should be read, so as to keep the thread of the history.

could fight for their country. And so they did, under the leadership of the chief high priest—Helaman. This was while the war was at its height—the year twenty-six of the Reign of the Judges. Later, sixty others joined the force.

Five years, all told, these youths were in the thick of the fight in one section of the country. They were brave to the point of daring; they not only never flinched nor held back in an emergency, but were always eager to throw themselves into line; sometimes their commander put it up to them whether or not they should fight, but invariably their answer was an eager yes. And yet, not one of the two thousand and sixty met death, although every one of them was wounded many times. This is remarkable. It was thought so by Helaman and by the whole force in that part of the country. Over and over again Helaman, in his letter to Moroni, comments upon the strangeness of the fact.

Not only so. But Helaman, after inquiring of the boys themselves, attributed it to their faith in the power of God. And, when he inquired into the source of this implicit faith, he found it in the wonderful mothers of these wonderful boys.

“Our mothers taught us that, if we did not doubt, God would deliver us.” It is an extraordinary application of faith.

Notes

1. *A Background of War*: Our own World War lasted four years. We thought that a long time, we who lived through it. And it was. But what shall we say of a war that continued for almost thirteen years? That is how long this war lasted between the Nephites and the Lamanites, if we count from the time of the defection of Amalickiah the Traitor. The war spirit was everywhere.

Evidently, however, there was no "draft law" among the Nephites, either at this time or at any time in their history. Whoever wanted to join the army, did so; and whoever wanted to stay at home, did that, too. And there were a great many "slackers" during these thirteen years. Also, the "king-men" were much in evidence at one time. For these not only still chafed under their defeat, but formed an alliance with the enemy, drove the chief judge from his office, and set up a king of their own. So that during at least part of the time that this war continued, these who were fighting to preserve their national existence, had to contend also against traitors in their own ranks. Since the beginning of the nation there had been no times quite so perilous.

2. *The Spirit of the War*: Men who have been in war in our own age—the Civil war, the Mexican war, the Spanish war, the World war—have said that, once they got the spirit of battle, it was not a difficult thing at all for them to choose their man on the opposite side and to pick him off as if he were a bird or an elk, and that the more they did of this the easier it was to do it. The spirit of war is blood. It brutalizes not only those who engage in the actual

fighting, but it coarsens immeasurably those who are at home raising the food and supplying the equipment. That is the general rule.

But here, in this war, there is a quite different spirit. We have already mentioned this fact, but it will bear amplification now, since it is so marked in the details of this lesson.

The Nephites, not only the commanders but the soldiers as well, have a horror of taking human life. This feeling they have got out of their religion. Only an extreme situation can force them to kill their enemies. Teancum, that fine patriot so clearly outlined in such few lines, steals over the enemy walls at night and runs his sword through the sleeping Amalickiah, but it is only because by killing that arch-traitor, he can prevent a greater shedding of blood. That section of the army where Helaman is, adopts the stratagem in place of face to face fighting, chiefly because of this extreme reluctance to take human life.

Moroni, time and again, refuses to take advantage of any situation to kill needlessly, or even to kill where it is obviously to his advantage. Even the two thousand young Ammonites say to Helaman, when he asks them if they will turn and fight Antipus, "We would not slay our brethren if they would let us alone." That is the thing in a nutshell. On the part of the Nephites the whole war is a war of defense.

3. *Moroni the Soldier*: The outstanding character in this war, of course, and one of the outstanding characters in the entire *Book of Mormon*, is Moroni, the commander in chief of the army. He is the embodiment of the finest that is to be found in man.

He is a man of unbounded resource. It is probably he who first used armor and breastplates and shields among the Nephites. We gather this from the astonishment of the Lamanites who came against his men in that first battle. Also, it would seem, he was the first to throw up earth-works and top them with wooden breast-works as a means of protecting cities in times of war. At any rate, whenever an emergency arose, Moroni was always equal to the situation. He was never one to just wonder what to do; he thought the situation through, and acted.

He was a patriot, if ever there was one. He loved liberty more than he did life. As soon as human freedom was threatened, he arose in its defense. That plea which he made at the beginning of the war stands unrivaled either in the *Book of Mormon* or elsewhere, for impassioned loyalty to a political ideal. And then, see how he writes to the chief judge, when it appears that something is wrong at home, while the men who are sacrificing to save their country are starving. "Behold, I will leave the blessings of God upon the army, and I will come unto you and stir up insurrections even until those who have desires to usurp power and authority shall become extinct."

He has unusual common sense. "Do you suppose," he writes to Pahoran, "that the Lord will deliver us, while we sit upon our thrones and do not make use of the means which he has provided for us?" No man had deeper faith in the power of God than had Moroni. But he believed also that "God helps those who help themselves." And then, look at the broad sympathy and tol-

erance he has for the very men he is fighting—the Lamanites. In this same remarkable letter he writes, "Can you suppose that the Lord will spare you who are undermining our liberties and at the same time come out in judgment against the Lamanites, when, as a matter of fact, it is the tradition of their fathers that has caused their hatred against us?"

He has the finest kind of restraint. Ambition is one of the strongest feelings in man. Man loves power, and usually he lets nothing stand in his way to it. At this time Moroni is easily the most powerful figure in the nation. The destinies of his people are in his hands. He is the commander of the army. He is conducting the greatest war of history, so far as the Nephites are concerned. And he is under no illusion as to his importance and his power. That is evident from the words and tenor of his letter to Pahoran. Yet he does not misuse his power. He could be the ruler of his nation, but he retires to private life so that he may die in peace. Washington is not more magnificent in this respect than Moroni. And that we are dealing with a primitive people does not lessen his grandeur.

4. *Goodness against a Background of Evil*: These things we have noted in the preceding paragraphs—the great reluctance of the Nephites to kill, the deeply religious nature of the commanding officers, the fine self-restraint of Moroni—are quite unique in the history of mankind. In the slime of war and degeneration there grows a fineness, a goodness, a spirit-control that is nothing short of beautiful. Imagine a modern general closing his report to his superior with the words which Helaman uses to Moroni:

"And now, my beloved brother, Moroni, may the Lord our God, who has redeemed us and made us free, keep you continually in his presence." Of course, we cannot imagine the thing in ancient times at all, outside of the *Book of Mormon*.

It is this good in the midst of evil that Mormon, the abridger of the Nephite record, has in mind in his book, as he describes the war. Otherwise the details of the war would not have been set down at all. Mormon wishes to tell how the spirit of Christ dominated the Nephite life even in war. It is a great record.

5. *Emigration*: At the close of the war, there was a great deal of shipbuilding going on. Hagoth is mentioned in this connection, and is represented as being "an exceedingly curious man." The "land northward" was reached by way of the sea. But at least two of the ships, loaded with men, women and children, went out to sea and "were never heard of more." It was supposed by the historians that their passengers were "drowned in the depths of the sea."

A great deal of curiosity has been expressed by the Latter-day Saints over this man Hagoth and these ships that never returned, especially since the conversion of so many Sandwich islanders to the faith. Many of our missionaries there have believed these natives to have been descendants of the people who left the mainland of America and, instead of being drowned, reached one of the islands and decided to stay there, or, finding themselves there, were unable to return. And

many things would go to show that this belief is founded in fact. Dr. Louis R. Sullivan, anthropologist of the Bishop's Museum at Honolulu, says that, although the matter of the origin of the Polynesian peoples has not been positively decided, he himself is convinced that they came originally from the same race as the American Indians.

Questions

1. How do you suppose the mothers of the two thousand and sixty young Ammonite soldiers managed to implant such faith in God and his power in their hearts? Try to imagine the process. Is that sort of thing done today?

2. How do you account for the fact that these Ammonite mothers—and the Ammonites in general, as a matter of fact—exhibited more faith than the Nephite mothers, or the Nephites as a whole?

3. Justify the idea in the Nephite leaders that it was not a wise thing for the Ammonite men to break their oath and join the army.

4. Explain the war spirit among us during the World War. Show the particulars in which it was not wholesome in its effects, both during and after the armistice. How, then, would you account for the spirit shown during the Nephite war?

References

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