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## Book of Mormon: In What Does Goodness Consist?

Editor(s): Mary Connelly Kimball

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# Lesson Department

## Theology and Testimony

(First Week in April)

Select Readings: Study Alma, chapters 12 to 15, inclusive. How many distinct ideas on religion are given here? What are they?

### BOOK OF MORMON: IN WHAT DOES GOODNESS CONSIST?

Nephtite leaders of thought had an idea that religion ought to begin at this end instead of the other end of life. To this idea we have already called attention.

Also we have remarked upon the bearing of this conception on the divine origin of the *Book of Mormon*. If Joseph Smith were the uninspired author of that record, he would most probably have been more concerned in the remote than in the near-by in theology, as his contemporaries were.

In nothing is this tendency to consider the near-end of religion in the *Book of Mormon* more pronounced than in the subject of the present lesson. The highly moral tone of the Gold Bible was what struck early converts to "Mormonism." It impressed the practical-minded George Q. Cannon, whose words we have quoted elsewhere. And it greatly impressed Willard Richards. After he had read the *Book of Mormon* twice in ten days and before he had joined the church, he said, "Either God or the devil has had a hand in that book, for man never wrote it."

The Nephites had a high conception of the value of the human personality. That we have also considered. It would follow, from this conception, that they would condemn severally all forms of murder and that they would safeguard hu-

man life in every way. And this they did.

"Wo unto the murderer who deliberately killeth," says the prophet Jacob, brother of Nephi the First, "for he shall die." That was in the fifth century B. C., when the Lehitites had been on the American continent but a few years. They brought this law with them from Palestine—an echo of the Ten Commandments. But observe its form. The murderer "who deliberately killeth." This phrase takes into consideration the condition under which any murder is committed. Is this phrase an outgrowth of Nephi's experience with Laban at the time he got the Brass Plates?

This strong condemnation of murder is in harmony with what is said elsewhere in the Record on the point. The same authority—Jacob—places murder as one of the "secret works of darkness" in the land, which must be destroyed. (II Nephi, 10:15.) In one of his letters to his son Moroni (Moroni, 9:10), Mormon attributes murder, which he strongly condemns, to "hardness of heart."

The Nephites believed in capital punishment. Alma the younger tells us (Alma, 30:10) that if a man murdered, "he was punished unto death." Presumably the judge took into consideration the conditions under which the crime was committed

as well as the motive that led to it. In the ninth chapter of Helaman we have an account of five persons placed under arrest for the murder of the chief judge. In this case, as it happens, the accused were innocent, but the point is that they were apprehended by the law.

The converted Nephite had a perfect horror of the taking of human life, and he would do so only where it was in self-defense. There are many cases in point.

Moroni, the military chief, always refrained from unnecessary killing in war. In the battle with Zerahemnah (Alma, chapter 43) he takes the very first opportunity, although he is victorious, to stop the "flow of blood." Later, during the Great War between the Nephites and the Lamanites, he does not "deal death to the enemy" when it is possible to win without doing so. This was partly because the Nephites considered the Lamanites less culpable than themselves in their wrongdoing on account of their lack of civilization and religion. When, however, the Nephites did the same things as the Lamanites, such leaders as Moroni were less considerate. And then, of course, the Nephite war leaders were always anxious to save their own soldiers.

Sexual sins were severely dealt with in *Book of Mormon* times.

That there were lapses from virtue among the Nephites goes without saying, for they were human. But these were punished. There was no winking at them at any time during the reign of religion on the continent. The ideal here also was derived from the teachings of Moses, which were contained on the Brass Plates.

Jacob, in the same place where he speaks of murder, inveighs as strongly against unchastity. "Wo unto them who commit whoredoms,"

he says (II Nephi, 9:36), "for they shall be thrust down to hell." And Abinadi tells the profligate priests of Noah, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Alma informs his son Corianton, who has been guilty of harlotry, 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." Jacob represents the Lord as saying, "I, the Lord God, delight in the chastity of women. And whoredoms are an abomination before me; thus saith the Lord of Hosts." And in the letter of Mormon to Moroni, from which we have already quoted, chastity, virtue is stated to be "the most dear and precious thing" in the world, and "above all things."

That will give an idea of the value which the Nephites placed upon chastity.

Of course, the Nephites, as well as the Jaredites, believed in marriage and the family life. This is evident on almost every page of the *Book of Mormon*. Over and over again reference is made in "Ether" to the large families of the first Jaredites. And the journey of the Lehitites to the Promised Land was delayed, as you remember, so that the sons of Lehi might have wives from the family of Ishmael.

Marriage is ordained of God. It is primarily a religious ordinance. In other words, marriage is a thing of the spirit as well as of the body. At all events, it is this ceremony that makes any union of the sexes valid. And any union of the sexes outside of this ritual is unholy. Herein lies chastity and herein lies unchastity, according to the *Book of Mormon*.

But men and women, under the religious polity of the Nephites, were required to do more than to

refrain from committing murder and sexual sins.

In the first place, there were the virtues of honesty, truthfulness, tolerance, brotherliness, and so on. "Wo unto the deaf," says Jacob (9:31-38), "that will not hear; for they shall perish. Wo unto the blind that will not see; for they shall perish also. Wo unto the uncircumcised of heart, for a knowledge of their iniquities shall smite them at the last day. Wo unto the liar, for he shall be thrust down to hell. Yea, wo unto those that worship idols, for the devil of all devils delighteth in them. And, in fine, wo unto all those who die in their sins; for they shall return to God, and behold his face, and remain in their sins."

What the great Alma said to his son Helaman seems to have been the law of the entire nation: "How strict are the commandments of God. And he said: If ye keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but if ye keep not my commandments, ye shall be cut off from my presence."

In the second place, the best kind of goodness required was a membership in the church, not only because the church included every virtue, but also because the association of man with man in a good cause always gives strength to carry on.

The Nephites had a church organization even before the advent of Christ in the flesh.

Of necessity the church had ordinances.

Ordinances are forms. Forms inhere in all society. No organized life socially is possible without forms of some kind. The nation—any nation—has its forms for the admission of aliens. So, too, have clubs, fraternities, and sororities, and other social groups. In truth, language itself, whether written or

spoken, is a matter of forms, tokens, or symbols. Forms stand for things and ideas. Also they conserve life. No permanence in ideas is possible without some sort of symbols. And so the church, which is organized power, needs forms, symbols, tokens.

One of the forms in the Nephite church, as in the church of the *Neze Testament*, was baptism. According to the Record it was administered only to adults and was by immersion of the whole body in water.

"Verily I say unto you," Jesus tells the Nephites on the occasion of his visitation to them after his resurrection, "whosoever repenteth of his sins through your words, and desireth to be baptized in my name, on this wise shall ye baptize them. Ye shall go down and stand in the water, and in my name shall ye baptize them. These are the words which ye shall say, calling them by name, Having authority given me of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. And then shall ye immerse them in the water, and come forth again out of the water. After this manner shall ye baptize in my name." (III Nephi, 11:23-27.)

The *Book of Mormon* condemns infant baptism in unstinted language. Says the prophet Mormon (Moroni, 8:10-15): "It is solemn mockery before God that ye should baptize little children. Teach repentance and baptism unto those who are accountable and capable of committing sin. Teach parents that they must repent and be baptized, and humble themselves as their little children, and they shall be saved with their little children. Their little children need no repentance, neither baptism; but little children are alive in Christ. He that supposeth that little children need bap-

tism is in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity; for he hath neither faith, hope, nor charity; wherefore, should he be cut off while in the thought, he must go down to hell. For awful is the wickedness to suppose that God saveth one child because of baptism, and the other must perish because he hath no baptism."

Moreover, baptism was for the remission of sin in the Nephite church. "The first fruits of repentance," continues Mormon (verses 24, 25), "is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth remission of sins; and the remission of sins bringeth meekness, and lowliness of heart; and because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter filleth with hope and perfect love, which love endureth by diligence unto prayer, until the end shall come when all the Saints shall dwell with God."

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was another of the ordinances in the ancient church on the American continent. This was so, however, only after the visitation of Christ to the Nephites. The manner and purpose was the same as among the Latter-day Saints. It was a sign of brotherhood among church members, as it is with us. The words used in the blessing of the Emblems are identical with those used in our Sacrament. (Moroni, chapters 4, 5.)

At the same time that Jesus instituted the Sacrament among the Nephites he gave this admonition: "Ye shall not suffer any one knowingly to partake of my flesh and blood unworthily, when ye shall administer it; for whoso eateth and drinketh my flesh and blood un-

worthily eateth and drinketh damnation to his soul; therefore if ye know that a man is unworthy to eat and drink of my flesh and blood ye shall forbid him."

Here, then, is the case for the *Book of Mormon* religious ideals.

It teaches (1) that a church is necessary with (a) faith, (b) repentance, (c) baptism, (d) confirmation, if we are to draw an inference, (e) the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper; (2) that human life must be held sacred, except in case of self-defense, as in war, and in case of such a crime as demands punishment by death at the hands of the political government; (3) that virtue, chastity, is as dear as life itself and the opposite the most "abominable" of sins, next to murder; and (4) that such virtues as honesty, loyalty, truthfulness, tolerance, charity, and the like are as necessary as any other to salvation.

### Questions

1. What is the proper function of the church? How is it that we need forms in the church? Show that forms inhere in life. What would you answer to one who said he does not believe organized Christianity to be necessary, that personal religion is the only thing necessary to any one? What is personal religion? Name the ordinances in use in the church of the ancient Nephites. What is the specific use and purpose of each?

2. It has been objected that Joseph Smith, in the *Book of Mormon*, takes up matters that were currently discussed in his time and neighborhood. Baptism, for instance. How would you answer this objection? Compare the doctrines mentioned in the Nephite Record with those in vogue now in the churches.