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The Middoni Principle

C. Robert Line

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ (Heb. 10:31). Paul’s statement is true not only in the sense that God’s vengeance brings fear upon the wicked, but also in that those who seek to place their trust in God during a moment of spiritual crisis (when the outcome of a particular leap of faith is in doubt) may experience anxiety. Putting our trust in God when we do not know the outcome can indeed be “a fearful thing.” During such moments we can trust and might even know that God will deliver us, but we are often uncertain about the method of deliverance. Elder Harold B. Lee taught that obeying in faith even while not understanding the reasons is the difference between “blind” obedience and “intelligent” obedience.¹

And after many days an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam, saying: Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord? And Adam said unto him: I know not, save the Lord commanded me. And then the angel spake, saying: This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth. (Moses 5:6-7.)

Adam was not guilty of blind obedience—that is, simply obeying because he was commanded. Rather, there was an initial trust in his Heavenly Father, a trust based upon spiritually confirming experience. Although Adam knew and trusted God, he would not learn the results of his obedience until later. He acted because he knew, as the Prophet Joseph Smith later taught, that “whatever God requires is right, no

matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof until long after the events transpire.”²

This kind of obedience—“intelligent” obedience—is demonstrated in the missionary labors of Ammon and Lamoni in the land of Middoni as described in the Book of Mormon. For the purpose of this paper, I will call it the Middoni Principle. It requires of us the understanding that: 1) not only should we always do what God requires, but 2) we should also realize that quite often what we want or righteously *desire* is often what the Lord wants; he just has a different way of orchestrating events than we sometimes contemplate initially.

After much service and preaching among the people of King Lamoni, Ammon finally reaped the harvest of souls he had longed for. Among this harvest was the conversion of King Lamoni himself. As was the case in Lehi’s dream, Lamoni, after having tasted the precious “fruit” of the gospel, desired now to share that fruit (1 Nephi 8:12; see also Alma 36:24) with his family: “And it came to pass that when they had established a church in that land, that king Lamoni desired that Ammon should go with him to the land of Nephi, that he might show him unto his father” (Alma 20:1).

Lamoni’s father was the chief of all the kings in the land (Alma 20:8). Apparently when Ammon inquired of the Lord to receive approval for this change in fields of labor his request was denied: “And the voice of the Lord came to Ammon, saying: Thou shalt not go up to the land of Nephi, for behold the king [the chief king] will seek thy life; but thou shalt go to the land of Middoni; for behold, thy brother Aaron, and also Muloki and Ammah are in prison” (Alma 20:2). Ammon told Lamoni the details of this revelation, whereupon Lamoni gave his wholehearted support and even volunteered his personal services to Ammon in order to free his brethren

from captivity.

At this point the story takes a strange turn. While on their journey to Middoni, Ammon and Lamoni encounter the chief king. Just as the voice of the Lord had warned, the chief king sought to take Ammon's life; his attempt, however, was unsuccessful. At first glance one wonders why the voice of the Lord would tell Ammon to go to Middoni and not visit Lamoni's father in Nephi, if they end up encountering him anyhow. The Lord knew that Ammon and Lamoni would meet the chief king. In light of what happened, maybe the issue with the Lord was not "what is the best way to protect Ammon?" but rather, "What is the best way to bring about the conversion of the chief king?" God does intervene to save and protect, but he can never force the conversion of the soul (Helaman 14:30-31; 2 Nephi 10:23-24; see also *Hymns* #240).

God does, however, take a hand in shaping the circumstances and events surrounding the conversion of the soul. It might well be that being away from the confines of his home, and all the security that comes with it, was precisely what King Lamoni's father needed in order for a change of heart to take place. Perhaps the initial trek toward Middoni and the subsequent meeting out in the wilderness was a more effective way for God to show the chief king "the great love [that Ammon] had for his son Lamoni." Furthermore, once Ammon withstood the king and the king had to listen, he "was greatly astonished at the words which [Ammon] had spoken, and also at the words which had been spoken by his son Lamoni, therefore he was desirous to learn them" (Alma 20:26-27). Sometimes the only way the Lord enters into our hearts is when he takes us out of our element—out of our "comfort zone."

King Lamoni's desire to share the gospel with his father was a righteous desire that was fulfilled in a peculiar manner.

We all have moments in life when we want spiritually “to go to Nephi,” as it were, for whatever righteous reason we might have. The real test comes when the Lord tells us “to go to Middoni” instead. When this happens it is imperative that we not only do what the Lord says, but that we realize that by so doing it is quite likely that our original desired outcome just might be fulfilled, albeit in a better way. In Proverbs it states, “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death” (Prov. 14:12). The same idea is found in Isaiah, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8). As President Wilford Woodruff said, “We should begin to understand that God’s ways are infinitely superior to our ways, and that His counsels, though they may seem to call for sacrifice, are always the best and the safest for us to adopt and carry out.”³ What we desire in righteousness is often what the Lord desires, although His method in achieving that desired outcome is often different from what we would expect.

When tensions ran high in Missouri in 1834, various Saints in Kirtland and surrounding areas joined in the march of Zion’s Camp in order to give relief to Saints in Zion and to help restore their property. The command of the Lord fueled their cause: “Behold, I say unto you, the redemption of Zion must needs come by power” (D&C 103:15). In the aftermath of several months of arduous and painful events, some would conclude that Zion’s Camp was unsuccessful. The distressed Saints in Zion were relieved to some extent, but the issue of lands being recovered was not resolved at that time. Was Zion’s Camp a failure? To those who understand “the Middoni principle” it was not. As President Wilford Woodruff later explained:

We gained an experience that we never could have gained in any other way. We had the privilege of beholding the face of the prophet,

and we had the privilege of travelling [sic] a thousand miles with him, and seeing the workings of the Spirit of God with him, and the revelations of Jesus Christ unto him and the fulfilment of those revelations. And he gathered some two hundred Elders from throughout the nation in that early day and sent us broadcast into the world to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Had I not gone up with Zion's Camp I should not have been here to-day, and I presume that would have been the case with many others. . . . By going there we were thrust into the vineyard to preach the gospel, and the Lord accepted our labors.⁴

Elder Orson F. Whitney understood this principle as well. Concerning the redemption of Zion by power he stated: "The redemption of Zion is more than the purchase or recovery of lands, the building of cities, or even the founding of nations. It is the conquest of the heart, the subjugation of the soul, the sanctifying of the flesh, the purifying and ennobling of the passions."⁵ Interestingly, a revelation regarding the land in Zion states: "In time ye shall possess the goodly land" (D&C 103:20). It is apparent that the Lord's plan for the redemption of Zion is different than what was expected by some of the Saints.

Similarly, many Jews at the time of Christ failed to recognize the promised Messiah, not because of lack of expectation, but due to their incorrect understanding of what type of Messiah would come. The Jews expected a political leader to free them from Roman oppression, not a suffering servant to free them from sin. When we lean on our own understanding and forget to trust in the Lord we are inherently insisting that our wisdom is above the Lord's. Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote:

When we are unduly impatient with circumstances, we may be suggesting that we know what is best—better than does God. Or, at least, we are asserting that our timetable is better than His. Either way, we are questioning the reality of God's omniscience as if, as

some seem to believe, God were on some sort of post-doctoral fellowship, trying to complete His understanding and, therefore, needing to use us as consultants.⁶

“The Middoni principle” entails more than mere obedience. It involves “intelligent” obedience, coupled with the knowledge that although the Lord may often want what we want, his method for realizing those wants is not always identical with our methods. Not only are his methods often different from ours, they are superior as well. “Obedience [is not] a mindless shifting of our personal responsibility,” Elder Maxwell declared. “Instead, it is tying ourselves to a living God who will introduce us—as soon as we are ready—to new and heavier responsibilities involving situations of high adventure. Obedience, therefore, is not evasion; it is an invasion—one that takes us deep into the realm of our possibilities.”⁷

Notes

1. Harold B. Lee, *Improvement Era*, Oct. 1962, 742.
2. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 256.
3. James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965-75), 3:145.
4. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards & Sons, 1851-86), 13:158.
5. *The Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 65.
6. Neal A. Maxwell, *Nowwithstanding My Weakness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1981), 59-60.
7. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1980), 127.