

STUDY NOTES

Lesson 4: Mosiah Chapters 3-4

Alma 42: 17 "Now, how could a man repent except he should sin? How could he sin if there was no law? How could there be a law save there was a punishment? . . .

22 But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth; otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God."

GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS

The third chapter of Mosiah is, as far as this author knows, the only chapter that is entirely the words of an angel. These words were delivered to King Benjamin with instructions that he was to repeat them exactly as they were given, to the people when they gathered together at the temple in Zarahemla. The chapter is not long, but every word is significant. Taken all together these words are a summary of the Glad Tidings, the Good News, in other words, the Gospel.¹ We sometimes lazily refer to everything we learn at church as "the gospel", and while all those things may be good things indeed—beliefs like celestial marriage, the priesthood and the pre-mortal existence—they are not The Good News. In scripture, the gospel, or the good news, refers to very specific information.

This good news announces the coming of a Savior to earth to atone for all the sins that man would commit as a result of the Fall of Adam. You might say the Good News revealed the antidote for a sickness that had infected the whole world. All of us were sick and dying of the disease. But wait! Joyful news! There is a cure. We don't have to die.²

We would still all get sick. The bad news (sin) still had powerful sway in human life. People, all of us, born into this mortal fallen world would fall prey to the disease. In the words of the angel, they would become "enemies" to God. They would have "naturally" an inclination to disobedience and willfulness, to selfishness and pride. In the words of Isaiah, "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way." (Isaiah 53:6) Or as the Apostle Paul simply states, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

It is not hard to explain this disease to little children, who are quick to recognize it. One little child said of the natural man, "Oh, I know who he is! He's Mr. Me Most, Me First, and Me Best!" Children begin to be taught empathy and concern for others in family home evenings, Primary classes, kindergarten and perhaps most importantly, in the modeling of their parents and other family members. But this socialization is not in itself enough. Eventually we must go beyond this learning to what the scriptures call a new birth, so that we may receive a "new heart" and a "new spirit," the spirit of the Holy Ghost to live within us and develop in us the very character of Christ. This need for spiritual rebirth is a major message of the Book of Mormon, and of the Book of Mosiah.

THE ECONOMY OF SALVATION

The trouble with "the natural man," in God's eyes, is that such an unredeemed person does not particularly *want* to obey God. God, we need constantly to be reminded, is the One who created us, who gave us this world, and who gives us life and "lends us breath." Without Him, we wouldn't be. Thus, we owe Him everything—really, we owe Him EVERYTHING. Even all the things we think we own and worked hard by our own labor to achieve—no, it's all His. Our duty upon this planet is to obey this creator God. In fact the simplest of all scriptural explanations of what man is doing here on earth is found in Abraham 3:25: "And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them."

¹ The word "gospel" is from the Old English "godspell" which meant good (god) speech, news, or discourse (spell). The gospel is the good news.

² The disease is sin. The righteous judgment upon sin is death. The atonement provides a way for man to avoid suffering the demands of justice, i.e., spiritual death.

It's a test, you see. And the human race fails. Dust does better than we do. Plain old dirt obeys God quite perfectly. Trees obey. Mountains obey. Water parts at His word. But man is an "enemy to God." In our pride, we have better ideas. God says, keep the Sabbath day holy. We don't want to be holy; we'd rather be lazy. He says, Love not the World. We want more and more stuff. He says, Love your enemy. But we want to get even.

When we try to obey God we realize at some point that we are fighting our own selves. We fight those urges in us that want what we want when we want it. Our bodies want to obey their sexual urges. We want to eat what we know isn't good for us until we are stuffed. We want to watch screens full of entertainment until we're stupefied and lose our tempers and gripe about our co-workers or our husbands or our neighbors. Let's face it. We are not born saints. At least not the first time we are born.

But just when all seems hopeless, the angel says, "Rejoice! And tell it to your people, that they also may be filled with Joy!" (Mosiah 3:4 paraphrased) There is a Savior going to be born and live among men on earth! You will know that He is God because He will have power over all the ills of life in this fallen world. He will be able to command the sick to be healed and they will be healed. He will be able to give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. He will have power over Satan and be able to cast out evil spirits. He will even be able to conquer the ultimate enemy of man—death. He will raise the dead from their graves. A hero, indeed, is coming to rescue fallen man." We now have hope. For if He can do all that He surely can heal the spiritually blind and deaf, the hardheaded and hard-hearted. He can even heal me.

BLOOD ATONEMENT

For all the time that Israel lived under the Mosaic Law, they had seen the drama of the atonement acted out through the sacrifice of animals. Once a year on the day known as Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the high priest would take the blood of a sacrificed animal into the holy of holies and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat, where it would make atonement for the sins of the people. In Leviticus 17:11 we read, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul." In his discourse, the angel makes five different references in twenty-six verses to the atoning blood of Christ. It is this blood that actually pays the price that must be paid.

Specifically speaking of Christ's spilled blood he says, "And lo, He shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be His anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of His people." (Mosiah 3:7) Then as the angel continues his discourse on the atonement, he uses the phrases: "His blood atoneth for the sins of those who have fallen by the transgression of Adam," "the atonement of His blood," "the blood of Christ atoneth for their sins," and "the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent." Clearly this is a concept that we are not supposed to miss.

So important is this idea of the atoning blood, that it is the very thing the sacrament prayer tells us we are supposed to "always remember" so that we might "always" have His spirit to be with us." (D&C 20:79) It was the apostle Peter, a firsthand witness of the events of the atonement, who wrote to the early Christians, "ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold...but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." (1 Peter 1:19)

DOING A HARD THING

How do we remember always this sacrifice made for us? This year I happened to be on the East coast in my daughter's ward for the yearly Primary Sacrament Meeting program. There I heard a most amazing talk by an eleven year old girl on the subject of Christ's sacrifice for us and the response it called forth in her own heart. She said her primary teacher had taught her last summer all about the atonement and the crucifixion and the resurrection. Then she described it in her own words. I will do my best to recreate it. "Did you know they put a crown of thorns on Christ's head and pushed it in. And they whipped Him and made him carry a big heavy cross on His back through the street. And He was practically naked. And His back was bleeding and He had to carry that cross. Think about it! Then they put him on the cross and nailed Him to it!" At that point in her talk she abruptly seemed to switch topics. "I want to talk about praying. I really don't like to do it. That's because every time I remember I'm supposed to pray I'm already in bed all warm and cozy under the covers. I don't want to get out of bed on my knees on the cold floor. But then I remember. I think of the terrible hard things He did for me, and I think, I can certainly do this hard thing. And I get out of bed and pray."³

³ She was quite the precocious eleven year old!

What hard thing is Jesus Christ asking of you? Can you remember always the price paid for you to receive the good news that your sins can be forgiven and that you can be changed and given a new heart and a new nature? We must never forget the very great personal price that was paid by Jesus, so that we could have every good thing. Is this why the scriptures admonish us so often to remember? We certainly live in a world of distractions. Helaman spoke this advice to his sons: "O remember, remember, my sons, the words which king Benjamin spake unto his people; yea, remember that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, who shall come; yea, remember that he cometh to redeem the world." (Helaman 5:9)

JUDGMENT DAY

The angel's other main point in Mosiah 3 is that everyone who knows these truths is held accountable for their response to them. The angel affirms that after King Benjamin tells the people his words, "even then are they found no more blameless in the sight of God, only according to the words which I have spoken unto thee." (v 22) Every person will face a very real judgment day. Though not the subject of very many TV sitcoms or Hollywood movies, the fact that mankind "shall be judged, every man according to his works, whether they be good, or whether they be evil" is a fact. Our proper response to this information should be to repent. Without taking advantage of the proffered atonement through repentance, our experience at the judgment bar of God will be to "shrink from the presence of Lord into a state of misery and endless torment, from whence they can no more return; therefore they have drunk damnation to their own souls." (3:25) If that sounds scary, I think we can assume that the Lord intended it to be scary.⁴ We only get one turn on earth, and our Heavenly Father does not want us to waste it in comfortable oblivion, but to wake up to the seriousness of our situation. A little of the cold water of reality splashed in our faces can help that to happen.

WHO YOU CALLIN' A SINNER?

And apparently, the words of the angel were sufficiently sobering to King Benjamin's people, that when he finished delivering them, he looked up and saw that "they had fallen to the earth, for the fear of the Lord had come upon them." (4:1) What exactly had caused such a remarkable response? They had "viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth." (4:2) As you recall, the comparison to dust is to remind us that the physical world, represented here by dust, is perfectly obedient to God. Man, on the other hand, is not; but is rather, "carnal, sensual, and devilish," a colorful phrase not found in the Bible, but repeated four times in the scriptures of the restoration.⁵

It is not a comfortable realization—that we are sinners. Some may think that they are not sinners since being a sinner must mean you have something to confess to your bishop. But that is not what it means. Being a sinner means you are human. Sometimes LDS sisters have a hard time getting their mind around the idea that they are "sinners". It is easy to fall into the trap of believing yourself righteous just because you compare favorably to the surrounding pagan culture. But these confusions can be quickly cleared up if one will pray and ask God to show you one or more of your own sins in His eyes. These prayers are answered, and always with humbling effect. There is always something of the natural woman remaining in us that still needs working on and overcoming.

If there is anything that the devil doesn't want, it's to have people get the real "fear of the Lord" in them—the kind King Benjamin's people demonstrated. He wants us instead to compare ourselves to other people rather than to the measure of the perfect Son of God. That way we can feel smugly better than all the people that we think are worse than we are. Or, just as useful to our enemy, we will compare ourselves unfavorably to others and decide we are a hopeless case. Either error keeps us from dependence on Christ: the first by pride and the second by a sense of hopelessness.

King Benjamin's people had no such illusions. Their response to the "view of themselves in their own carnal state" was one of full repentance, for they cried out, "O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified!" (v2)

REPENTANCE: KEY TO ETERNAL LIFE

Repentance is the only correct response to the sobering facts of our life here on earth. In fact, the Doctrine and Covenants, our own modern day scripture, is replete with commands to "cry repentance,"

⁴ D&C 19 reveals the entire meaning of these passages in the Bible and Book of Mormon that seem so hopeless in their talk of "endless torment" and "eternal punishment." This modern revelation explains that punishment is Eternal and Endless, because those are names of God, and Eternal Punishment is another way of saying "God's punishment." He uses this sobering language "that it might work upon the hearts of men." Whatever works.

⁵ Mosiah 16:3; Alma 42:10; Moses 5:13; and Moses 6:49.

“declare repentance,” and “say nothing but repentance to this generation.”⁶ In Section 19 we find a good one sentence summary of the angel's version of the Gospel: “And of tenets thou shalt not talk, but thou shalt declare repentance and faith on the Savior, and remission of sins by baptism, and by fire, yea, even the Holy Ghost.”(D&C 19:31)

Every day we need to humble ourselves before our God and cry unto Him for mercy and beg Him to apply the atoning blood of Christ to our own sins. And it is essentially this idea that King Benjamin goes on to expound to his people. Chapter four contains Benjamin's own thoughts on what has just happened. He is happy to see that his people have been “awakened...to a sense of [their] nothingness, and [their] worthless and fallen state.” This hard language is a stumbling block to some. Especially to women who might have been subject at some point in their lives to emotional or physical abuse that labeled them as “worthless.” While we need the truth of our fallen condition, we also need the truth of who we are.

PRECIOUS SOULS—A WORTHLESS STATE

Therefore we must be careful not to misunderstand what is being taught. For it is not the souls of men and women that are “worthless.” Quite the contrary. Multiple scriptures tell us that our souls are “precious” to God⁷, and that “the worth of souls is great in the sight of God...” (D&C 18:10) It is our fallen state that is worthless and brings us to this condition in which we find ourselves at enmity with God. Exactly because we are precious children of our Heavenly Father, and worth so much, our Savior, Jesus Christ, was willing to suffer in our behalf. Again we come to the relief and realization of the good tidings—an atonement was made in our behalf, causing terrible suffering to the one who paid the price—the One who loved our precious souls with such incredible love.

NO OTHER WAY

Benjamin hits home the points he wants the people to be sure to understand. First, there is no other way. “There is none other salvation “ except this one, and “no other condition upon which man can be saved”(v.8). Then Benjamin reiterates the simple message. 1) You must believe in God; that He is, and that He created all things; believe that He has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in earth...” (v.9) 2) You must “repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that He would forgive you.”(v.10) 3) Then, if you have “known of His goodness and have tasted of His love, and have received a remission your sins,” you must remember, and “always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and His goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures,” (v.11) and 4) “humble yourselves even in the depths of humility, calling on the name of the Lord daily, and 5) standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come...”(v.11) These conditions apply equally to us in the latter days, with the exception that we must now stand steadfastly in the faith of that which has already come (Christ's earthly ministry).

If the people will do these things, Benjamin says that they will “always retain a remission of [their] sins; and grow in the knowledge of the glory of Him that created you...” (v.12) Such a people will live in peace with one another and will not have a mind to injure one another. They will keep their children from quarreling.⁸ Remembering the mercy that has been shown to them, they will want to be merciful to others, even to those who have “brought their misery upon themselves.” “For behold, are we not all beggars?” There is tremendous power in this simple phrase. In the temple we find reminders as well that we are in a position of begging before our God. To forget this is the greatest ingratitude to God. To remember is to stay always in a right relationship with our fellow man and with our Father.

The reward of this kind of life is “knowing of His goodness” and “tasting of His love.”(v. 11) It is phrases like these that give such power to the message of the Book of Mormon. In plain language this book testifies of the love, joy and goodness that God is waiting to pour out upon His sons and His daughters if they will only “come unto Him.” When we have tasted of His love, we will begin to see and feel how precious all of God's children are to Him. Then the motivation will come into our own lives to tell others the Good News of the atonement of our Savior, Jesus Christ, that they too, might experience this joy.

⁶ D&C 34:6; D&C 14:8; D&C 11:9; D&C 6:9;

⁷ Psalm 49:8; Alma 31:35; Alma 39:17; D&C 109:43.

⁸ I wish that Benjamin had added here-- “as much as humanly possible.” Perhaps if his wife had written his speech he would have.