

## **Mosiah 2-5: Benjamin's Valedictory Address**

My readings in the Book of Mormon this morning began with Mosiah chapter 2. I have not read in the last two days, and I don't usually make any great effort to remember where I am at in the book, so as I opened to my bookmark and saw the chapter heading I was immediately excited. Mosiah 2 is the beginning of a great sermon, and I needed Benjamin's teachings today.

Verses 1-8 deal with the preparations for the sermon. I think that the references to sacrifices suggest the possibility that this was related to the celebration of a Mosaic feast, although I am not well schooled enough to say which one. However, we find in Mosiah 6 that Benjamin lived three more years, so he wasn't really on the brink of death. To me it only makes sense that he would choose some established occasion for his last address to his people.

One of the things I did as I read this morning was to try to picture the overall structure of Benjamin's address. I think it may be helpful to summarize it here.

2:9-11	Introduction, reason for the sermon
2:12-15	Justification of his righteous rule
2:16-19	Service to men is service to God
2:20-26	Our indebtedness to God
2:27-30	Transfer of authority to Mosiah
2:31-41	Importance of obedience, and the dangers of disobedience
3:1-11	The life and mission of Christ
3:12-22	Salvation only available in Christ
3:23-27	These words make the people accountable for their actions
4:1-3	The people respond with a plea to God
4:4-10	Benjamin assures the people of the righteousness of their course
4:11-30	Practical instructions on keeping in the right way
5:1-5	The people respond by making a covenant
5:6-15	Benjamin seals covenant with assurances of its efficacy, and the dangers of disregarding it.

As Benjamin opens his address he starts with an admonition to the people to give heed to his words. At the end of verse 9 we find this call to attention:

*...you should hearken unto me and open your ears that ye may hear, and your hearts that ye may understand, and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view.*

In the margins of my scripture I have related the three faculties which he addresses – ears, hearts, and minds – to physical, emotional and mental attention; or in other words, a call to dedicate their whole souls to his words. However, by concentrating on the faculties I have kind of gotten in the habit of not reading the whole phrases. As I read more carefully, and paid attention to what the people are to do with each faculty, I realized that there is a very careful echo of the temple covenants here. I do not know if the temple covenants as we know them were administered among the Nephites, but Benjamin had some familiarity with them.

In the next section Benjamin emphasizes the importance of service, on the part of the king and of the people, as a way of serving God<sup>1</sup>. The reason this works is because we are all children of God. Whether a king or a peasant, our station before God depends only on our choices of service and obedience, because we are all his.

In verses 20 through 25 Benjamin emphasizes that we have no legal claim on God through our actions. He created us, sustains us, and blesses us for any act of obedience. Even our bodies are of the dust of the earth, which dust is God's. We are always indebted to God, never the other way around, so there is no room for us to depart from him even for a moment. What a powerful illustration of why we cannot

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1 Whenever I read Mosiah 2:17 I am brought to another recollection. This verse was the MIA theme many years ago. When it was introduced one of my friends was asked to speak about the verse, and he said that it was easy for him to remember the reference because it was his birthday – February 17. That friend was a faithful member and a mental giant. However, on his mission he made some poor choices which caused damage to the church and resulted in his excommunication. I met him after my mission, and he was a different person. My feeling was that he no longer reflected the light of Christ. While in this state of rebellion he was in a tragic automobile accident, which left him with much-impaired mental abilities. He was limited to functioning on the level of a child, yet he could remember when he was intelligent. However, his heart was softened, and he repented and was re-baptized. I know that this recollection is not directly tied to Benjamin's sermon (although it illustrates in a large degree what Benjamin taught), but the verse by itself always brings back the memory.

become lax in our obedience.

Verse 27 is an illustration of the watchman principle<sup>2</sup>. Benjamin felt the need to warn the people one more time so that they would be responsible for their own sins. He who is called to teach – king, pastor, or judge – must teach, or his punishment is great. We who have the gospel are called to teach others. If we teach, our reward is the peace of which he speaks in the next verse.

King Mosiah had had a lot of work to calm contention among his people, so Benjamin warns the people specifically about this danger. Contention is the doorway to the evil one<sup>3</sup>. The only outcome from that course is eternal punishment. Indeed, to choose to follow evil after knowing the truth is worse than if one had never known the truth at all. Such an one comes out in rebellion against God, and is an enemy of righteousness. Any sign of rebellion in our lives should be viewed as a very alarming danger sign, as it represents a clear warning that we are no longer on the Lord's side. I cringe when I hear people brag of their independence, or that no one can teach them anything. That is an admission of lack of reliance on the Lord, and if unchecked will lead to apostasy.

Finally, in verse 41 Benjamin returns to the message he wants the people to remember – the blessed and happy state of the righteous. Our obedience should not be motivated by a fear of punishment, but by the hope and love of goodness itself.

In Chapter 3 Benjamin relates the words spoken to him by an angel in a vision. There is no time associated with the vision, although it is reasonable to assume that it was not too long before the time that Benjamin gave this address. However, it is key to getting the full benefit from this chapter to remember that it was spoken by the angel – the words are not Benjamin's.

The summary of Christ's life, works, death, and atonement given in verses 5 through 18 is beautiful and compelling. If this section is read with the company of the Holy Spirit it is impossible to avoid feeling the depth of the importance of Christ's work. Christ is powerfully set forth as the central figure in the plan of salvation, the hope of mankind, and the only support on which men can rely eternally. What joy fills my heart as I consider his blessed name, and the hope that I have of

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<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 33:1-9

<sup>3</sup> list = desire or choose

eternal life through him.

The Jews come in for special chastisement from Benjamin because of their unwillingness to see Christ in the Law of Moses. His point that salvation comes through Christ, and not obedience to the law, is a lesson we need to heed today. Personal righteousness avails us nothing if it is not centered in Christ.

Verse 19 is one of those scriptures which is widely quoted, and yet I know for many years I did not understand nor ponder its true significance. Who is the natural man? I do not believe that this implies that men are naturally wicked, for that goes contrary to many other teachings of the Lord<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, I think the best understanding of the natural man comes from verse 16 of this chapter. "...as in Adam, or by nature, they fall..." It is the nature of this telestial world, which state was achieved through the fall of Adam, that there is a power of temptation in the world. Who follows that nature becomes an enemy to God. However, there is also a power of improvement, described here as "the enticings of the Holy Spirit." I have found great comfort and hope in the idea that we are to yield ourselves to these enticings. In fact, it is as easy to be righteous – or perhaps easier – than it is to chose to follow the "nature" of this world.

The virtues ascribed to children in this verse have nothing to do with being simple, ignorant, or self centered, which are also characteristics of children. Rather we are urged to be submissive to Christ, meek<sup>5</sup>, humble, patient, and full of love. The thought in verse 20 is the logical conclusion of this activity: when all mankind (or at least the majority) learn to behave so, then the knowledge of the savior will fill the world. We can look forward to that time with hope and assurance.

The remainder of chapter 3 discusses the responsibility each person has to live according to whatever light he or she has. These verses seem to emphasize the consequences of not living by that light much more than the blessings attendant to living righteously. I have noticed this in many places in the scriptures, and I think it is just economy of expression – unrighteousness is more common than righteousness. Still, in this case it is particularly interesting because Benjamin's people chose righteousness as a consequence of his presentation.

So chapter 4 begins with the people's immediate response to

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<sup>4</sup> D&C 93:38, Moroni 8:8 are examples.

<sup>5</sup> I am mindful of a talk where meekness was described as "power under control."

Benjamin's talk. Having felt the witness of the spirit that the words they have heard are true, the people fall to the earth and plead with God to grant them mercy because of the atonement of Christ. Because of their faith they immediately receive the remission of sins and the joy they desired. Looking ahead to chapter 5, the people say that their hearts have been changed by the Spirit of the Lord, and they have no more disposition to do evil.

I have pleaded with the Lord many times to change my heart with respect to a number of things, but to be rid of the disposition to do evil was certainly one of them. One day while talking with my mother I expressed that desire. She told me that I had no disposition to do evil, that I just needed to realize that. At the time I thought she was wrong, but I have since learned that she was very correct. I am not free of sin, and may not be in mortality. But by and large the desires of my heart are for righteousness. The challenge for me is to depend on the Lord Jesus Christ to strengthen me to do righteousness. I have been able to use this doctrine several times as I have counseled with people who also felt discouraged over their personal state of righteousness. I am grateful to Benjamin and his people for this scriptural account, but I am also grateful for a wise mother who helped me to understand.

Beginning with verse 5 Benjamin proceeds to lay out for his people how salvation works – which indeed is the same discussion I just covered in the previous paragraph. We arrive at salvation by recognizing our standing before God, by exercising faith and trust in Christ and his great atoning sacrifice, and then by striving diligently to keep his commandments. There is no other way.

It is interesting that in these verses Benjamin also ties together the three central themes of the plan of salvation: the creation of the earth, the fall of Adam, and the atonement of Christ. I suppose that for each of us we could add a fourth event: our birth into mortality, thus instigating this stage of our progression through the plan of salvation.

The remainder of chapter 4 is devoted to practical aspects of living the gospel. First is to remember always our standing before God. He is so far above us that we cannot comprehend it. One of the important outcomes of this doctrine is that, although individual salvation for every one of God's billions of children may be inconceivable to us, but it is well within his power.

The word “retain” is used twice in verses 11 and 12, then “retaining” in

verse 26. The message has to do with continuing in the decisions and covenants the people have made after hearing the talk. It is easy to feel uplifted and inspired when we hear the word of the Lord spoken and we are in company of many other people likewise seeking righteousness. It is quite another thing to continue day to day in that righteousness when we have to confront all the pains and challenges of mortality. So to live Benjamin's injunction to retain the realizations of truth and remission of sins requires a constant effort to remember and follow through. Someone once described this as a daily "checkup from the neck up."

When Benjamin talks about raising children righteously he particularly mentions avoiding contention. Contention is always the consequence of Satan's influence, not God's. I know that in my family we have struggled with sibling rivalry. It may be a natural part of childhood, but refer back to 3:19. Parents are to teach children love and service, and to avoid contention.

The section on giving to beggars has always been of interest to me. Although I have seen many beggars who obviously did need the charity they were requesting, I have also seen the opposite. I live in a very affluent area, and from time to time there will be homeless people begging at the freeway intersections. We have given clothing and other goods to these people, because that I know they need. However, there have been occasions when that help was not accepted gratefully. It turns out that, through the established charities in this city, the homeless people can get all of life's necessities. The street corner activity is truly about money. While stopped at a light I saw one individual receive paper money from 3 drivers ahead of me. Even if each of those was a \$1 bill, that still amounts to about \$120/hour! That is much more than I make. Benjamin's admonition is to give to sustain life, not to encourage a lifestyle. So there is still a very careful judgment required of us in order to give righteously.

Verse 27 states that all things are to be done in order. I see this as an instruction related to the previous section. It is possible to try to give ourselves entirely to a cause for which we are not truly prepared, with the consequence that we can "burn out," lose enthusiasm, and possibly end up worse than we were before starting. So we are to be measured in our responses, and depend on the Lord's strength instead of our own. If we truly live that counsel we will be able to judge righteously.

Benjamin speaks of returning that which we borrow, but then observes that there are so many ways to sin that it is impossible to enumerate

them all. So the conclusion echoes verse 27 – we need to watch constantly, and depend on Christ. If we fail at this we will perish. “And now, O man, remember<sup>6</sup>, and perish not.”

In chapter 5, as previously discussed, the people describe the effect which King Benjamin's discourse has had on them. The people then invoke a covenant to obey God that they may not perish. That this is a righteous and desirable covenant is abundantly clear, and Benjamin commends the people for the righteousness and wisdom of their choice, indicating that by this means the people have taken Christ's name upon them and become his sons and daughters. I wonder as I read this how that covenant relates to, or does not relate to, the people's baptismal covenant. The doctrine of baptism is taught repeatedly in the Book of Mormon, but as I review the events leading up to this discourse I realize that the people were living under the law of Moses, in which I would assume the doctrine of baptism was probably not essential. And so we see Benjamin's people making this covenant in lieu of being baptized, and we see Alma later baptizing the people in Mormon and in Zarahemla. Indeed, baptism was viewed as an extraordinary covenant, and not a requisite part of their religious observance. And so I suppose that this is how Alma becomes named the founder of their church<sup>7</sup>, because he made general the practice of baptism as a formal entrance into the society of God's people.

So, instead of baptism, Benjamin's people take upon them the name of Christ through this group covenant in front of their king. Indeed, they had not been a wicked people, so this is why Benjamin gave them the covenant<sup>8</sup>. As he prepared to turn the kingdom over to his son he decided to do everything he could to safeguard his people from the effects of evil<sup>9</sup>. His father Mosiah fled from a people that had become entirely apostate, so I suppose that this conversion of Benjamin's people was a logical outcome of the process began by Mosiah.

The counsel to be “steadfast and immovable” is an interesting one. A recent conference talk pointed out, referring to Lehi's vision of the tree of life, that it is not enough to enter into the right way, we must persist in it. Benjamin knew his people were righteous, and especially at this moment as they made their covenant they were in tune with God, but the moment wasn't sufficient – they needed to endure.

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6 This is also a central thought of the sacramental prayers.

7 Mosiah 29:47

8 Mosiah 1:11

9 Notice in verse 14 as Benjamin illustrates the importance of belonging by discussing an ass. He very nearly calls us asses if we do not obey God's commands.

Verse 15 is not just the end to this magnificent discourse, but also Benjamin's testimony as to the nature of God. We speak frequently of God as our father, which he is. However, we too need to remember that although he gives us his love and individual attention, he is still the supreme being of the universe, and we should feel awe, respect, and fear towards him, along with love. His plan for us includes wisdom, power, justice, and mercy. God is indeed great.

Chapter 6 is something of a *denouement* to King Benjamin's discourse. He certifies that all of the people who were of the age to do so did enter into the covenant, the kingdom is turned over to his son, Mosiah, and Benjamin lives out the last three years of his life in peace. As a literary technique it is fairly important and common; but the Book of Mormon is not largely styled as a work of literature. Why did Mormon put it here? I would suppose it was partially to help explain the contrast between the main Nephite civilization in Zarahemla, and the people of Limhi whose history begins in the next chapter.