

1 Nephi 4:10-18: The Voice of the Lord on Killing Laban

In my mission this was the only passage in the Book of Mormon about which an investigator ever requested an explanation. Coming as it does at the very beginning of the book it is hard to miss, and it certainly seems hard to understand. Why would the Lord command Nephi to kill someone?

There is one very interesting point to keep in mind: Nephi wrote this section over 30 years¹ later. It was a huge event in his life, and important enough that he recorded it on the small plates, which were only supposed to contain that which is “pleasing unto God.” So it is no accident that this account was preserved for us, and we are supposed to learn spiritual truths from it.

As Nephi begins the account he gives the most fundamental key to this story: “And it came to pass that I was constrained by the Spirit that I should kill Laban”. The instruction came from God. What the Lord commands we must obey. The general rule is that we have the commandments before us and we have been instructed sufficiently to know God's will. However, it is also true that we each can receive personal revelation to direct our paths. That personal revelation must always be in accord with revealed truths; otherwise we know it is not from God. But when it comes we must obey.

Was this revelation in accord with revealed truths? Certainly it runs counter to the 6th commandment, and Nephi was well aware of that. However, when the Israelites invaded Canaan they were commanded to slaughter entire civilizations, so there is precedent for the fact that not killing is dependent on some set of circumstances. Nephi himself gives the explanation for these circumstances in 1 Nephi 17:35.

Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God. But behold, this people (the Canaanites) had rejected every word of God, and they were ripe in iniquity; and the fulness of the wrath of God was upon them; and the Lord did curse the land against them, and bless it unto our fathers; yea, he did curse it against them unto their destruction, and he did bless it unto our fathers unto their obtaining power over it.

Similarly, Nephi has to work through in his mind the applicable circumstances here. His initial reaction in Verse 10 is that he would rather not do it. His reference to “Never at any time have I shed the

¹ 2 Nephi 5:30-32

blood of man” was certainly reminiscent of the 6th commandment. However, in the next verse the Spirit points out it was the Lord who had commanded him. Nephi then starts considering the situation. Certainly, Laban had tried to kill Nephi, and had been guilty of stealing. These are not adequate reasons for Nephi to kill Laban, and in fact are not the reasons that Nephi ultimately does it.

In verses 12 and 13 the Spirit renews the command – Slay him. The Spirit adds the explanation that the Lord slays the wicked so that righteousness can go forth, and that, in effect, Laban is standing between the truth and the future righteousness of the Nephite nation. Nephi considers these truths, laying them out in verses 14 through 17. When he finally does kill Laban with his own sword, he makes clear that the reason for doing so was obedience to the voice of the Spirit.

The basic lesson is that obedience to the Lord supersedes all other concerns. That is a good lesson, and one few would actively argue. But there is a subtlety here which is not as straightforward, but still important. What happens when we feel an urge to do something which is in keeping with what we want to do, but perhaps not clearly in keeping with the Lord's commands? How can we tell if it is inspiration or simply what we want to do?

Nephi refers to the voice of the Spirit, and I suppose that if we could clearly identify a heavenly voice it would greatly simplify the question. But how many of us truly hear a voice in such moments of decision? I know that I don't. The answer still lies, though, in being spiritually in tune. We may not be able to carry on a verbal debate with the Lord, but we must train ourselves to recognize his will. So there will be some times when we err, and either act willfully, or neglect to fulfill an instruction. It is a process of learning. We need to learn to recognize when we are on the Lord's mission, and when we are on our own. We need to watch for the indications – do we feel the clearness and joy that come from obedience, or do we feel the selfishness of pride? In that sense, we are learning to identify a heavenly voice, even if there are no words involved.

It is a frightening thing to learn to act for the Lord. Numerous wrongs have been perpetrated throughout history by those who justified their actions as being the will of the Lord. But that is our mission, every bit as much as it was Nephi's. We cannot excuse ourselves from action on the grounds that we are not sure. We will ultimately bear responsibility for all applications in our lives of true humility – did we do what the

Lord wanted when he wanted us to do it? We cannot excuse evil actions nor evil inaction based on our spiritual insensitivity. This is why living the gospel – following the voice of the spirit – must be a daily activity. It is also why repentance must be a part of our daily lives. When we fall we must have an attitude of repentance, and a willingness to learn, change, and trust in the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

There is little in the life of Nephi which would suggest that discipleship is a painless path, and the lesson of Laban is no exception. However, the rewards of discipleship are huge, and that is also the lesson of Nephi's life. In that sense, being a true disciple is easier than any of the alternatives.