

Helaman 12: Mormon on Human Frailty

Verse 1 starts off with “And thus we can behold...”, which is Mormon's way of introducing one of his commentaries on a lesson from the Book of Mormon. It is interesting to consider the experiences that Mormon had gained, both as a general of the last Nephite army and as a prophet-historian. I suppose it is well worth beholding when he says we should.

So what are we beholding? The Nephites, having fallen into wickedness, had been called back to repentance by the miraculous ministry of Nephi son of Helaman. Their righteousness had ushered in a wondrous era of peace which lasted only about 4 years because of dissenters from the truth. After only 9 years the people had become entirely wicked. Mormon, with his perspective of the sweep of Nephite history, observes and comments on the pattern.

He starts by listing all the blessings that a people receive for righteousness. Close to the end of his list he mentions “softening the hearts of their enemies.” In contrast the consequence of this ease, according to Mormon, is that the people “harden their hearts, and do forget the Lord their God, and do trample under their feet the Holy One.” In the next verse Mormon indicates that it is only through intense hardship that people remember the Lord.

In my younger days I remember disagreeing with this analysis. I felt that tribulations made me miserable, and it was easier to turn to the Lord when all was going well. However, with the passage of a few years, I now observe in my life what Mormon indicates. I may read the scriptures, pray, and attend to priesthood responsibilities all the time, but I tend to display more earnestness in my pleadings when things are going wrong. Calamities remind me that I am insufficient by myself, and that I require the Holy One if I am to progress to where I want to be. I believe that one of the marks of spiritual maturity is maintaining that knowledge and desire all the time.

In verses 4-6 Mormon comments on the root cause of this failing in men – pride. They – we – somehow believe that we are expressing freedom when we set our own course. The reality is that we are simply following Satan's course any time we do not follow the Lord's¹. To think that there is happiness anywhere except in following the Lord's counsels is indeed “foolish.”

1 Matthew 7:13, 14 and D&C 132:22.

In the longest section of this commentary, verses 7 through 22, Mormon illustrates the insignificance of men – at least, the “natural man²” - by comparison to the Lord's other creations. The Earth does all things in obedience to the Lord's command. The dust of the Earth, mountains, the seas, even the Earth itself, respond immediately to the Lord's word. However, the only part of the Lord's decrees that men obey with certainty is the consequences of their actions, and that because of inevitability, not because of the proper exercise of agency.

The blessings of the Lord can only fall on those who repent and obey. Those who choose this course receive joy in this life, and eternal salvation in the next. Happiness comes not from pride, but from submitting ourselves to the Lord.

In verses 24 through 26 Mormon has a rather interesting benediction to this sermon. He prays for salvation for all men, through the fullness and grace of God. However, he notes, “we read that” there are some who will reject salvation and shall be cast out from the presence of the Lord. Through most of Mormon's life he saw that most of the people had rejected the Lord's path, and were following wickedness. How, then, could he feel any hope that all men would be saved? I believe that his experiences with the goodness of God and the sweetness of his salvation were so intense that at a visceral level he just didn't understand how anyone could ultimately reject God. Indeed, he may have been hoping in post-mortal acceptance of the teachings and ordinances of the gospel for the redemption of all men. I, too, struggle to understand how anyone could reject the Lord when his teachings are received after this life. However, we read that some do, and so it must be. The pull of pride is so great that some cannot resist it, even with a certain knowledge of what the consequences of their actions will be.

And thus we can behold why mortality is a necessary part of the Lord's plan. In the premortal existence I am sure that none of us who had survived the great conflict between good and evil believed that we could ever turn our backs on the Lord in the future. We had to come to earth to understand how easy it is to fall if we do not turn to the Lord in every thought, word, action, and desire.

When all is said and done, Mormon's last comment sums it up perfectly: “And thus it is. Amen.”

² Mosiah 3:19