

## **1 Nephi 17:23-51: Nephi on Building a Ship**

The setting for this sermon is that Lehi's family is halted at the edge of the ocean, and Nephi has been commanded to build a ship to cross the waters. Laman and Lemuel, upon seeing Nephi's intent, start complaining and don't want to work. This is the sermon that follows.

The last part of the complaint has to do with the fact that the people at Jerusalem were righteous, and that Lehi and Nephi did wrong to judge them. This makes a natural lead-in to the start of the sermon, in which Nephi talks about the relative righteousness of the children of Israel and the inhabitants of the land of Canaan. However, there is more to it than just the convenient segue. The core of Nephi's message is that happiness and prosperity come from heeding the word of the Lord, and that only suffering and misery follow from disobedience.

The exodus from Egypt is a common archetype in the scriptures for God's watchful care over his people. Nephi carefully explains the lengths to which God went to safeguard the Israelites – delivering them from Egypt, opening the Red Sea, manna and water provided in the desert, and guiding them with cloud and fire. Even noting the hardness of the Israelites hearts, Nephi then points out that the inhabitants of the land were completely wicked, and the Israelites, being more righteous, were then enabled to drive the Canaanites out.

There are two clarifications in this sermon about the story of the exodus in the Old Testament. First, Nephi explains that the Canaanites had completely rejected the word of God, and that was why they were destroyed. Second, in telling of the fiery serpents sent to punish the Israelites, Nephi explains that some of the Israelites died because they thought it was too easy to look at the brass serpent to be saved. The first may ease some concerns about why the Israelites were commanded to be so ruthless in the destruction of the Canaanites. The second has an immediate application to Laman and Lemuel.

The problem that Laman and Lemuel had was that they didn't believe that building a ship was the command of God to their brother. In the story of the fiery serpents, Nephi alludes to the idea that perhaps they thought this was too simple of a thing for the Lord to be concerned. Nephi shows that the Lord is concerned about every detail having to do with the salvation of his people – temporally or spiritually – and that Laman and Lemuel are putting themselves at risk by ignoring something that they think is too easy.

The conclusion of Nephi's story about the Israelites shows how through the years they have become as wicked as the Canaanites were, and are now at risk of being destroyed.

That thought leads to Nephi's stern denunciation of Laman and Lemuel. They are swift to do iniquity, and slow to remember God. They have beheld visions and heard the voice of the Lord, but the defect that keeps them from being saved is that they are "past feeling," so that the voice of the Lord to them had no unusual power. The message about miracles is clear – miracles do not create faith, and cannot do a person any good in the absence of a sincere desire to obey.

As Nephi shares his grief over his brothers' unrighteous choices, he says that the influence of the Spirit has left him without physical strength. Curiously, this is the only part of the sermon which seems to connect with Laman and Lemuel. They see this as their opportunity to overpower Nephi and throw him into the ocean. Without meaning to, they validate all of Nephi's discussion. They are thoroughly wicked, they are beyond hearing the voice of the Lord in Nephi's words. They are, at their core, slaves to evil. Even when this was explained to them, they were unable to repent and follow righteousness. Their destruction had crept up on them a little at a time; so carefully that they were unaware of their peril. There was no threatening music, no dramatic foreshadowing. Just the natural consequence of a train of unrighteous decisions. Fortunately for them, the divine power which was poured out on Nephi kept them from going ahead with their murderous plot at that time. In the long run, though, they never did abandon their ways.

In Verse 51 Nephi makes a most educational concluding point for his sermon. He asks:

And now, if the Lord has such great power, and has wrought so many miracles among the children of men, how is it that he cannot instruct me, that I should build a ship?

This verse has come to mean a lot to me in relationship to callings. The Lord has asked me to do many things – serve a stake mission, be a ward clerk, teach in the Primary. Some of those have appeared hard to me at the time. Nevertheless, how is it that he cannot instruct me to do these things? He can, and I will be blessed to the extent that I obey his voice.