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Alma's Invitation to Enter into the Rest of the Lord

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Alma's Invitation to Enter into the Rest of the Lord

Alma's speech in chapter 12 reached a powerful crescendo which in turn became the springboard to his discussion of the priesthood covenants in the premortal world in chapter 13. For us, the crescendo often falls flat because his ideas are outside of our usual frame of reference. But for his audience, his point was powerful and well aimed.

In verses 36-37, Alma called their attention to both the warning and the blessing promised in the 95th Psalm. The psalm reads:

- 1 O come, let us sing unto the Lord:
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.
- 2 Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving,
and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.
- 3 For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
- 4 In his hand are the deep places of the earth:
the strength of the hills is his also.
- 5 The sea is his, and he made it:
and his hands formed the dry land.
- 6 O come, let us worship and bow down:
let us kneel before the Lord our maker.
- 7 For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.
To day if ye will hear his voice,
- 8 Harden not your heart, as in the provocation,
and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness:
- 9 When your fathers tempted me,
proved me, and saw my work.
- 10 Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said,
It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways:
- 11 Unto whom I swear in my wrath
that they should not enter into my rest (Psalm 95:1-11).

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Alma said that a similar provocation on their part would preclude their entering into the Lord's rest. Many years before that, Nephi's brother Jacob had drawn a similar conclusion:

Wherefore we labored diligently among our people, that we might persuade them to come unto Christ, and partake of the goodness of God, that they might enter into his rest, lest by any means he should swear in his wrath they should not enter in, as in the provocation in the days of temptation while the children of Israel were in the wilderness (Jacob 1:7).

Paul understood the 95th Psalm's message the same way:

7 Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith, To day if ye will hear his voice,
8 Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness:
9 When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years.
10 Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do alway err in their heart; and they have not known my ways.
11 So I swear in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest.) ...
15 While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation.
16 For some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses.
17 But with whom was he grieved forty years? was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness?
18 And to whom sware he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not?
19 So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief (Hebrews 3:7-19).

Each used the ideas in the psalm to remind his audience of the time when the children of Israel were camped at Horeb, at the foot of Mount Sinai. There, though they had the opportunity, they refused to hear the voice and see the face of the Lord. The Lord stood on the mountain, concealed behind dark smoke (as a veil), and spoke to them, but they refused to hear him or to regard his invitation. This is the way the story is told in Exodus:

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3 And Moses went up unto God, and the Lord called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel. ...

6 And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel. ...

10 And the Lord said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes,

11 And be ready against the third day: for the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai. ...

16 And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled.

17 And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount.

18 And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.

19 And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice.

20 And the Lord came down upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the Lord called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up (Exodus 19:3-20).

On the mountain, Moses received the Ten Commandments:

18 And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off.

19 And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.

20 And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not.

21 And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was.

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22 And the Lord said unto Moses, Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven.

23 Ye shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold (Exodus 20:18-23).

Moses retold the story with a somewhat different emphasis in Deuteronomy, which was his great last sermon to his people:

10 Specially the day that thou stoodest before the Lord thy God in Horeb, when the Lord said unto me, Gather me the people together, and I will make them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me all the days that they shall live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children.

11 And ye came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire unto the midst of heaven, with darkness, clouds, and thick darkness.

12 And the Lord spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice (Deuteronomy 4:10-12).

4 The Lord talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire,
5 (I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to shew you the work of the Lord: for ye were afraid by reason of the fire, and went not up into the mount;) saying,

6 I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage (Deuteronomy 5:4-6).

8 Also in Horeb ye provoked the Lord to wrath, so that the Lord was angry with you to have destroyed you.

9 When I was gone up into the mount to receive the tables of stone, even the tables of the covenant which the Lord made with you, then I abode in the mount forty days and forty nights, I neither did eat bread nor drink water:

10 And the Lord delivered unto me two tables of stone written with the finger of God; and on them was written according to all the words, which the Lord spake with you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly (Deuteronomy 9:8-10).

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The provocation was that the Lord had invited them to hear his own voice and see his face, but they refused. In the above accounts, there are four verses that tell the whole story:

18 And all the people saw the thunders, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off.

19 And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die (Exodus 20:18-19).

4 The Lord talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire,
5 (I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to shew you the work of the Lord: for ye were afraid by reason of the fire, and went not up into the mount) (Deuteronomy 5:4-6).

Alma spoke of two “provocations.” The first was the time the people refused to enter the Lord’s rest at Sinai:

36 And now, my brethren, behold I say unto you, that if ye will harden your hearts ye shall not enter into the rest of the Lord; therefore your iniquity provoketh him that he sendeth down his wrath upon you as in the first provocation (Alma 12:36a).

The second would be the present invitation of the festival temple drama to enter the presence of God rather than refuse because they cannot endure the glory of the Lord:

yea, according to his word in the last provocation as well as the first, to the everlasting destruction of your souls; therefore, according to his word, unto the last death, as well as the first (Alma 12:36b).

In the last verse of the chapter, Alma returned to his earlier statement that to harden one’s heart is to refuse to know the mysteries of godliness. Thus he wrapped this part of his discourse into a single package, with the “second commandments” being their present opportunity to enjoy the ordinances and covenants that brings one in the presence of God.