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“Lest Ye Become As the Nephites of Old”

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Susan Black

*I*n 1831 the Lord assured his Saints that it was the will of the Father to give unto those who seek the “riches of eternity.” In addition, he confirmed that “the riches of the earth are mine to give; but beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old” (D&C 38:39).

The abundance of the earth has been promised to the obedient followers of Christ since the time of Abraham (Genesis 26:3-5), and this promise has continued on down to Lehi (2 Nephi 1:9), Joseph Smith,¹ and even to the obedient of our present day.²

In our day “the Lord has blessed us as a people with a prosperity unequalled in times past.”³ Today, many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are prospering temporally. Necessities and even luxuries in some cases abound with respect to good food, fine clothing, precious jewelry, comfortable homes, and much more. Today’s members have been called the “modern Nephites”⁴ because they, like the Nephites of old, are constantly challenged with the temptation of a damning pride which arises so readily from abundant temporal prosperity.

Let us heed the ancient and modern prophets and

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search the Nephite records to discover what they teach about the relationship between temporal prosperity and spiritual life or death.

God Would Give Prosperity to All

From the beginning, the Lord taught the Nephites that he generously bestows temporal prosperity on the just and even the unjust (Jarom 1:8; Mosiah 11:8; 2 Nephi 1:9). He also taught the Nephites that when they began to be obedient to his commandments, they would begin to prosper both spiritually and temporally (Alma 1:29). Thus this strong relationship between obedience and temporal and spiritual prosperity was taught to the Nephites from the beginning. The promise was spiritual and temporal prosperity for obedience; however, if disobedience occurred there was a threat of destruction (2 Nephi 1:9-13; Jarom 1:9; Ether 2:10).⁵

This blessing and its companion curse are recorded and demonstrated repeatedly during the centuries of Nephite history. The Nephites would repent and become more spiritual; then within a short time they would begin to increase in riches as had been promised (Jarom 1:9). The curse was also repeatedly witnessed as the Nephites became more wicked, refused to keep the commandments, and ultimately were destroyed (Mormon 3:9 through chapter 6).

The ancient Nephite experience can solve several puzzling questions about the dilemma of prosperity. They will guide our study of prosperity in the Book of Mormon.

Is there a promise of temporal prosperity as well as spiritual prosperity for obedience? If so, is it granted to the entire church or only to individuals within the church? Is this promise peculiar to the Nephites, or does it extend to all in our day?

From the time of Adam, God has invited man to “subdue” the earth and to “have dominion” over its creatures (Genesis 1:28). He has assured us that he has “made the earth rich” (D&C 38:17) for the “benefit and the use of man . . . and it pleaseth God that he hath given all these things unto man” (D&C 59:18, 20). Moreover, he desires

to extend the material blessings of the earth to both poor and rich, for "all flesh is mine, and I am no respecter of persons" (D&C 38:16). For "he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

The temporal blessings of the earth are extended by God to all his children. We see throughout the Book of Mormon that even those who rebelled against him generally enjoyed possessions of gold and other material luxuries (3 Nephi 8). Despite their prolonged wickedness, God continued to extend his hand to them by sending both physical and spiritual nourishment in the form of love and hope (Helaman 7:4-5). These gifts are still extended by a loving Father, regardless of our righteousness.

In addition, there have always been promises of temporal blessing extended in extra measure to the righteous, the obedient, the repentant. Abraham and his descendants were given a "land of promise" (see Genesis 12:7). Similarly Lehi (1 Nephi 2:20), the brother of Jared (Ether 2:8), and the latter-day Church (D&C 38:18) were given choice lands.

The promised lands were abounding in milk and honey (D&C 18:8) and other temporal riches (1 Nephi 18:25). These lands were bestowed initially because of the bounty of God and the worthiness of one or a few great souls. The descendants of these few could continue to enjoy the "promised land" unless they reached a "fulness of iniquity" (Ether 2:9-10).⁶

The first set of temporal riches promised to Adam's posterity were given without regard to individual righteousness. The second set of temporal riches, illustrated by the patriarchal inheritances of Abraham and Lehi, were given because of the worthiness of a forebear. In both the Adamic and the patriarchal promises there existed a basis for humility because those who received the temporal gifts had not personally earned them but received them because of the worthiness and love of another (e.g., Christ, Abraham, Lehi).

The third set of temporal gifts consisted of the blessings of prosperity that came in accordance with the Lord's specific decree, "Inasmuch as ye shall keep my command-

ments, ye shall prosper" (1 Nephi 2:20).⁷ This promise of spiritual and temporal wealth, extended to both Lehi and his seed (1 Nephi 4:14), was fulfilled many times among Lehi's posterity. For example, when Nephi and his family first separated themselves from the threatening Lamanites, they were obedient to the law of Moses and did "prosper exceedingly." This prosperity included reaping in abundance, working with precious ores, and building shelters, including a temple of "exceedingly fine" workmanship (2 Nephi 5:10-16).

Was the promise restricted to only the constantly righteous among the Nephites? No. Throughout the years, the Nephites increasingly hardened their hearts to the commandments and were inclined to prideful, selfish, and adulterous behavior (Jacob 2). However, the promise of prosperity continued with them. Were they being rewarded for unrighteousness? Not at all. Over these difficult years their kings and leaders (Jacob, Enos, and Jarom) were men of faith who preached with increasing harshness and ruled with strictness such that the law of Moses was generally observed. For many generations these increasingly reluctant but still ultimately obedient Nephites continued to prosper as promised by the prophets. They "became exceedingly rich in gold, and in silver, and in precious things" and were not overcome in battle (Jarom 1:3-8).

However, after approximately three hundred years, even the leaders began to falter. One leader described himself as "a wicked man" (Omni 1:2). At this time many people willfully rejected the prophets and were eventually destroyed as had been promised (Omni). However, the righteous residue was preserved, a result which also accorded with a promise (Omni 1:7; Mosiah 2:22; Mosiah 2:4).

The blessings of prosperity were not limited to the constantly obedient like those who first joined with Nephi, but also included those who struggled with righteousness—those stiff-necked Saints who readily fell into divers sins but were eventually repentant. However, these wavering Saints seemed to need unusually harsh and plain words from their righteous leaders. They required "mighty men

in the faith” (Jarom 1:7) who taught diligently, “continually stirring them up unto repentance” (Jarom 1:12). By listening, the repentant were spared speedy destruction (Enos 1:23). Once again they “multiplied exceedingly . . . and became exceedingly rich in gold, and in silver, and in precious things, . . . in buildings . . . and all preparations for war” (Jarom 1:8).

But there were a few who would not obey, no matter how powerful the warnings or how strict the laws. And yet the hardness of their hearts, the deafness of their ears, the blindness of their minds, and the stiffness of their necks were not automatic signals to God to destroy them instantly. Rather, these circumstances became occasion for greater diligence by prophets, priests, and teachers (Jarom 1:3). These servants showed them patience and long-suffering beyond ordinary understanding. Yet even they stood amazed at the Lord’s patience with the most resolutely wicked. In awe they wrote, “God is exceedingly merciful unto them” (Jarom 1:3).

However, when all ministrations in extended long-suffering yielded only continued rejection, then the few who totally refused to repent finally lost the promise of being preserved from destruction. According to the second promise, they were destroyed (Omni 1:5). In contrast, the righteous residue prospered (Omni 1:7; Mosiah 2:22; Mosiah 2:41).

It is clear that the consequences of disobedience were restricted to those who knowingly rejected the word of God and refused to obey it.⁸ Is this a message for our day? Does the Nephite promise of prosperity to the obedient apply to the members of the Church today? President Spencer W. Kimball has answered this query by reminding us that the Lord has promised us “the fulness of the earth . . . upon condition that we unreservedly obey his commands.”⁹

Why would the Lord make temporal prosperity a result of obedience if it can be so destructive? Is not spiritual prosperity sufficient as a reward for righteousness?

Whenever the prophets and teachers of the Book of Mormon received a gift, temporal or spiritual, their immediate, driving impulse was to share it with others (Mosiah 14-21; 4 Nephi 1:7). For example, after receiving revela-

tions from the Lord, Lehi left his wealth to share the riches of eternity with his posterity.¹⁰ Alma, a priest in the court of a wealthy king, after being converted, risked his life to lead and direct his fellowmen (Mosiah 17:2-3; 18:3). The wealth of Nephi, Alma, Benjamin, Mosiah and other righteous leaders was devoted to the welfare of their people.

Why were they so willing to share? It was because they were stewards and not owners of wealth and had learned, as President Kimball expressed it, to “hold all their possessions in trust, subject to the call of the Lord.”¹¹

The first step to righteous prosperity is obedience. The second step is consecration or true charity with a hope to be as the Lord himself is (3 Nephi 27:27). Prosperity can become a means of achieving this. Speaking of our unequalled prosperity, President Kimball wrote, “Forgotten is the fact that our assignment is to use these many resources in our families and quorums to build up the kingdom of God—to further the missionary effort and the genealogical and temple work; to bless others in every way, that they may also be fruitful.”¹²

Just as obedience to the Word of Wisdom leads to increased physical strength (D&C 89:20), so obedience to gospel commandments leads to an increased desire to share with and to love our neighbors.¹³ As we begin to master obedience, we become prosperous and are given increased strength and challenges to master the law of consecration—the law of charity. The lesson of charity is always present the moment that we are obedient enough to be called a Saint “through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and [become] as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love” (Mosiah 3:19). As we learn to be full of love, we do “not send away any who [are] naked, or . . . hungry, or . . . athirst, . . . having no respect to persons as to those who [stand] in need” (Alma 1:30).

Why is the blessing of prosperity so significant to the obedient Saint? It is significant because it provides an opportunity to learn the more challenging law of consecration, the law of true charity, the role of steward in the Lord’s vineyard (Moroni 7:46-47). Temporal prosperity provides us with a source of great joy as we use it to further the Lord’s purpose while serving as his trusted stewards.

The question remains, why give the Saints prosperity if it causes so many to fail? President Kimball prayed, “Bless all people, our Father, that they may prosper, but not more than their faith can stand . . . that they may not be surfeited with . . . wealth which would bring them to worship false gods.”¹⁴

And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good—to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted (Jacob 2:19).

The risk of pride, envy, lying, stealing, and idleness is great for the prosperous and appears to increase with the level of riches. However, we must learn to give by giving, to consecrate by consecrating, and to succor by succoring. However little the riches may be that follow obedience, our first challenge is to admit that we are rich enough to share, to practice charity. If we cannot admit that, we are in the negative sense rich enough to become blind to our spiritual and moral obligations.¹⁵

Given our unsurpassed modern prosperity, how can we avoid the destructive “Curse of the Nephites” and their fatal pride?

The key to avoiding dangerous pride in prosperity is to “seek . . . the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Luke 12:31; Jacob 2:18).

First, we are to learn the lesson of King Benjamin, who served “with all the might, mind and strength which the Lord [had] granted unto [him]” (Mosiah 2:11), recognizing that “when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17).

Second, we are to learn President Kimball’s lesson of the idolatry that lurks in every object—every temporal excuse for not having families, for not giving generously to the church and kingdom of God in means, time, and talents. We can be quick to see the false gods of power, wealth and influence in each of our lives. Moreover, when we see the idolatry we can confess it, repent of it, and most important, replace it with true consecration.

Third, we are to learn the lesson of stewardship. We

must learn that all we have is the Lord's. A portion may be assigned to us to care for, to nurture, or to further the Lord's purposes. But it is not ours to "own."

Why do the righteous often fail to receive the promised result of obedience—temporal prosperity? Why do the wicked often receive great temporal prosperity?

Many struggling Saints who feel that they have not received the promised prosperity err in this assumption. They are slow to concede their own wealth because their wants are so limitless.¹⁶ Alma's followers recognized great prosperity when they escaped from slavery with few material goods (Mosiah 24:23-25; 25:24). Nephi's followers felt that they prospered when they could earn a basic living, live in some degree of safety, and have means to build a temple (2 Nephi 5:11-16). By these standards it appears that every community of modern Saints prospers.

Recognition that even the most meager of temporal possessions, the widow's mite, makes us rich enough to render gifts to God, to our families, and to our neighbors is what righteous Nephites knew. When this gift of having "eyes to see" is absent, no amount of earthly wealth is enough to exercise true charity, to consecrate all to the service of the Lord. Righteous Nephites recognized the temporal gifts which surrounded them, and seemed to delight in laboring to accumulate great riches for service in God's kingdom. As an example, the righteous recognized the land as the means to construct supplies of food, clothing, and shelter. They recognized the presence of ore and lumber as the means to build monuments to their God (2 Nephi 5:17; see the preceding six verses).

These perceptions were in direct contrast with the views of the wicked. With few exceptions, the wicked were idle and had inclinations to exploit the labors of others. Theft, murder for gain, subtle tactics of flattery, deceit, and unlawful taxation were the means most often employed by the wicked. However, the wicked sometimes used methods that were also used by the Saints to gain riches, such as cooperative efforts, increase of skilled laborers, and industry (Alma 30:17).¹⁷

It appears that the courses pursued by the wicked were not beneficial over the years and generations

recorded in the Book of Mormon. The sacrifice-oriented community of Nephites grew stronger while the exploitive-parasitic community became fragmented (4 Nephi). Why was this the result? When the wicked work in secret societies (e.g., the Gadianton robbers), they multiply riches faster than those who work alone. However, they work together not for love of God or man but from a fear precipitated by secret oaths (Helaman 6:26, 29). These societies, organized to get gain at any cost, can be powerful and even transgenerational. But like carnivorous beasts, the secret societies can survive only when those who labor to accumulate wealth prey on those who permit predations.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing predations of the wicked was the successful adaptation of the prosperity principle of commerce (Mosiah 24:6). The wicked saw commerce as a means of having the benefits of plunder without costly warfare. For instance, the apostate Nephites taught the Lamanites to be literate and keep records in order to enhance their skills and strategies of trade, to be cunning and wise as to the wisdom of the world, and to plunder those outside their group through commerce while being friendly within their group (Mosiah 24:5-7). Elsewhere, apostate mentors avoided teaching of God, prophets, or the laws, thus assuring a belief that “whatsoever a man did was no crime” (Alma 30:17). Apparently, the only ethic they learned was the lesson of honor among thieves. Similarly, the robbers of Gadianton found that they could rob effectively without physical assault, and thus they became skilled in trafficking “in all manner of traffic,” laying up “in abundance” gold and silver (4 Nephi 1:46). However, the end results of this sort of rapacious trade were increased exploitations that fed the fires of pride, hatred, and strife, resulting in extinction of families, communities, and nations (Mormon 1-8).

Is the prosperity challenge of greater urgency in our generation than among the Nephite generations?

Since the time of Joseph Smith, latter-day prophets have warned us of pride.¹⁸ President Kimball taught that the willingness of many today to give all for things, power, prestige, and lustful sensation is unequalled in history and constitutes the modern manifestation of idolatry. “We fear

that never in the history of the world have there ever been so many more people bowing to the god of lust than there were bowing to golden calves. . . . This idolatry, so closely associated with the destruction of mind and body, could inundate the world.”¹⁹

When the prophet Mormon compiled records of the Nephites, he wrote, “Behold, the pride of this nation, or the people of the Nephites, hath proven their destruction except they should repent” (Moroni 8:27).

Moroni speaks further to us:

Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing.

And I know that ye do walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of fine apparel, unto envying, and strifes, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities; and your churches, yea, even every one, have become polluted because of the pride of your hearts.

For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted.

Yea, why do ye build up your secret abominations to get gain, and cause that widows should mourn. . . ? (Mormon 8:35-37, 40).

Moroni is talking to us! Let each of us consider whether we have adopted idol worship and have allowed the love of money, substance, fine apparel, lust, and vain ambition to become our false gods. Today is a day of unequalled prosperity, deadly pride, flagrant idolatry, and widespread lack of charity. Is it not time to examine the Nephite struggle with prosperity?

Should righteous Church members seek to obtain temporal riches? How essential is it to our salvation to seek and accrue riches?

The heart acts as a barometer registering the effect of temporal riches on each Saint. For in the heart, “Ye cannot serve God and Mammon” (3 Nephi 13:24). “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (3 Nephi 13:21). The commandment is to “seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you” (3 Nephi 13:33).

If we love God with all our heart, mind, might, and strength, then we have no room to serve mammon. As a consequence of total consecration we experience prosperity, both spiritual and temporal. For example, giving tithing opens “the windows of heaven” (Malachi 3:10) to a whole panoply of temporal blessings.²⁰ The Word of Wisdom “[shows] forth the order and will of God in the temporal salvation of all saints in the last days” (D&C 89:2). In essence, it could be said that all commandments include a promise of prosperity.

Therefore, “after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good” (Jacob 2:19).

Why would the Saints seek prosperity through obedience to commandments? One clear answer is to serve, to enrich, and to succor the lives of others.

What should the righteous “prosperous” member do with his riches?

Righteous Saints are to be charitable, for “a man being evil cannot do that which is good” (Moroni 7:10). They are to use their wealth to advance the kingdom of God on earth. They are to remember that they are stewards and not prideful owners. They seek direction from the owner of their riches and his leaders, and make their possessions “subject to the call of the Lord through his authorized servants.”²¹ They should give gladly from their hearts, for “except [a man] shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing” (Moroni 7:6).

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon teaches, from the vantage point of a thousand years’ experience, that the Lord willingly extends the riches of the earth to his obedient servants. These temporal and spiritual riches are a fulfillment of the oft-repeated theme, “Keep the commandments and prosper.” The prosperous Saint directs his stewardship by avoiding the dangers of pride and embezzled ownership, thus escaping destruction. He charitably gives of his stewardship in consecrated joy. Therefore, the true Saint will not “become as the [rich] Nephites of old” (D&C 38:39).

Notes

1. "I prophesied that the Saints would continue to suffer much affliction and would be driven to the Rocky Mountains. . . . [They will make] settlements and build cities and . . . become a mighty people in the midst of the Rocky Mountains." Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1973), 5:85.

2. In a speech given 8 March 1975, President Spencer W. Kimball said, at the Buenos Aires Area Conference, "I often pray that the Lord will bless the people with prosperity. . . ." Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), p. 354. Hereafter cited as *Kimball*.

3. Spencer W. Kimball, "The False Gods We Worship," *Ensign*, June 1976, p. 4.

4. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah: The Book of Mormon in the Modern World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1967), p. 390.

5. Of the twenty-one verses that link keeping the commandments with prosperity, eight verses include, verbatim, the Jaredite curse: "Wherefore he that doth possess [this land] shall serve God or shall be swept off" (Ether 2:10).

6. The Book of Mormon describes at least four methods used to pass knowledge from one generation to another in order to keep the promise we have been considering foremost in the minds of Lehi's posterity:

1. The Lord declared this promise directly to the prophets of each generation who in turn wrote it down as scripture (e.g., Lehi [2 Nephi 1] and Nephi [1 Nephi 2]).

2. Fathers passed information on to their sons (e.g. Alma to Helaman [Alma 37:13] and Alma to Shiblon [Alma 38:17]).

3. The prophets disseminated this knowledge universally (e.g., King Benjamin reiterated the Lord's promises to his people who consisted of Lehi's descendants as well as the descendants of Mulek [Mosiah 1:7]).

4. The promises were reviewed intermittently by the population as they were found written on the metal plates (Jarom 1:9; Omni 1:6; Alma 9:13).

7. The word "prosperity" is mentioned nine times in the Book of Mormon. Four of these references are associated with growth in the Church, meaning that men and women had given heed to the word of God and had joined themselves to the Church (Helaman 3:25), with no direct or indirect inference to secular prosperity. Five times "prosperity" refers to both land and riches in combination. When we include the word "prosper," fifty-four verses may be added to the list. Of these verses, thirty-eight link "prosper" with the land, while eight link "prosperity" to

riches. Of the sixty-seven verses that mention either "prosper" or "prosperity" in the Book of Mormon, fifty-one refer to land and connect land with riches.

8. The Lamanites who in ignorance did not obey the law of Moses were spared final destruction (2 Nephi 4:3-7). Only those Lamanites who were taught and fully understood the gospel message received the full consequences of their obedience or disobedience (2 Nephi 4:6; see also Helaman 13-15 regarding Samuel the Lamanite).

9. Spencer W. Kimball, "When Is One Rich?" *Salt Lake Tribune-Telegram*, 28 May 1949; quoted in *Kimball*, p. 358.

10. "Lehi was very rich, and he was a trader, for his wealth was in the form of 'all manner of precious things' such as had to be brought from many places." Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), p. 36. See also 1 Nephi 2:4.

11. "When Is One Rich?" *Kimball*, p. 358.

12. See also Spencer W. Kimball, "The False Gods We Worship," *Ensign*, June 1976, p. 4; also in *Kimball*, p. 357.

13. Samson's increased physical strength stemmed from obedience. His strength was not in itself righteous or evil but gave its possessor means to be more evil or more righteous. Also, Mormon was blessed with a large physical stature just as Samson was (Judges 13:24-16:30; Mormon 2:1). One chose to use his strength to magnify his service to God. The other chose to use his to advance selfish motives.

14. Dedicatory prayer for the Washington, D.C., Temple, 19 November 1974; *Kimball*, p. 354.

15. *Kimball*, p. 356.

16. "When Is One Rich?" *Kimball*, p. 356.

17. The righteous were very adept in finding mutual benefit from taking the fruits of their industry to "buy and sell and traffic one with another, that they might get gain" (Ether 10:22). Indeed, it was said of the righteous Jaredites under King Lib that "never could be a people more blessed than were they, and more prospered by the hand of the Lord" (Ether 10:28).

18. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1938), p. 137.

19. "Why Call Me Lord, Lord, and Do Not the Things Which I Say?" *Ensign*, May 1975, p. 7; also in *Kimball*, p. 280.

20. James E. Faust, "The Responsibility for Welfare Rests with Me and My Family," *Ensign*, May 1986, p. 21.

21. "When Is One Rich?" *Kimball*, p. 358.