

CHAPTER 23

Alma 1–4

Introduction

Alma the Younger faced severe challenges while serving simultaneously as the high priest over the Church and the first elected chief judge over the Nephites (see Alma 4:18). Both the Church and the government were threatened by men seeking to use religion and politics for their own gain. Nehor undermined the Church by using priestcraft to establish a religious movement and profession that attracted many (see Alma 1). Amlici, a man after the order of Nehor, made war against the newly elected government of judges after failing to obtain his desire to be king (see Alma 2–3). Notice how Alma prayed, exercised faith in God, and then took action to overcome each of the problems he faced. Consider how you can follow Alma’s model as you deal with your own personal challenges.

Commentary

Book of Alma

- As compiler of the Book of Mormon, Mormon faced difficult challenges in determining what to include in the abridged record. At least two directives guided his selections. First, the Lord told Mormon to “write the things which have been commanded” (3 Nephi 26:12). Second, Mormon saw our day and the conditions that would exist (see Mormon 8:34–35). We understand, then, that when Mormon made editorial decisions, these two factors were his governing concerns.

It is instructive to compare the length of books in the Book of Mormon and the time periods they covered. The inordinate amount of writing for a rather small period of history alerts the reader that the time of Book of Mormon history covered by the book of Alma is especially parallel and relevant for our time. For more comparison, see the chart “Book of Mormon Pages and Time Periods” in the appendix (p. 411).

Alma 1:3–4. Nehor Taught That a “Teacher Ought to Become Popular”

- Nehor used flattery and false doctrine to attract followers and attack the church of God. His teachings were popular because they excused sin in the name of religion. He encouraged wickedness, rationalizing that

“in the end, all men should have eternal life” regardless of their personal behavior (Alma 1:4).



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Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles urged us to have the courage to reject modern-day Nehors and their popular messages: “Nehor’s words appealed to the people, but his doctrine, while popular to many, was incorrect. As we face the many decisions in life, the easy and popular messages of the world will not usually be the right ones to choose, and it will take much courage to choose the right” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1993, 88–89; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1993, 67).

- In Alma 1:4 Nehor taught that “all men should have eternal life.” Verse 16 states that priestcraft was “preaching false doctrines . . . for the sake of riches and honor.” One of the false doctrines often promoted by those guilty of priestcraft is that “all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble” (v. 4). A major problem with priestcraft is that there is no teaching of repentance, “For they were of the profession of Nehor, and did not believe in the repentance of their sins” (Alma 15:15).

- Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles instructed gospel teachers to look to the Savior and to help their students do the same: “A gospel teacher will never obscure [students’] view of the Master by standing in the way or by shadowing the lesson with self-promotion or self-interest. This means that a gospel teacher must never indulge in priestcrafts, which are ‘that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of

the world' (2 Nephi 26:29). A gospel teacher does not preach 'to become popular' (Alma 1:3) or 'for the sake of riches and honor' (Alma 1:16). He or she follows the marvelous Book of Mormon example in which 'the preacher was no better than the hearer, neither was the teacher any better than the learner' (Alma 1:26). Both will always look to the Master" (in Conference Report, Oct. 1999, 102; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1999, 79).

Alma 1:5–6, 16. Priestcrafts

- Nehor encouraged priestcrafts and self-promotion to gain riches and honor. Nehor's example shows that we should be suspicious of those who seek personal fame or wealth from their preaching. Nephi previously defined priestcraft: "Priestcrafts are that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of Zion. Behold, the Lord hath forbidden this thing" (2 Nephi 26:29–30).
- Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles also defined priestcraft for teachers in the Church: "Anything you or I do as an instructor that knowingly and intentionally draws attention to self—in the messages we present, in the methods we use, or in our personal demeanor—is a form of priestcraft that inhibits the teaching effectiveness of the Holy Ghost. 'Doth he preach it by the Spirit of truth or some other way? And if it be by some other way it is not of God' (D&C 50:17–18)" ("Seek Learning by Faith" [an evening with Elder David A. Bednar, Feb. 3, 2006, 4, www.ldsces.org]).

ALMA 1:7–9

How did Gideon first respond to Nehor's false teachings? What can we learn from Gideon's experience?

Alma 1:7–9. Gideon "Was an Instrument in the Hands of God"

- The record states that Gideon "was an instrument in the hands of God" (Alma 1:8). As a member of the colony that lived in the land of Nephi, he resisted the

wicked leadership of King Noah (see Mosiah 19:4). Later, Gideon became "the king's captain" during the reign of Limhi and played a significant part in preserving the colony and helping them escape to Zarahemla (see Mosiah 20:17; 22:3–9). Once in Zarahemla, he met the high standards set forth to become a teacher in the Church (see Mosiah 23:14). When confronted by Nehor's false teachings, Gideon admonished Nehor "with the words of God" (Alma 1:7). As a result, Gideon was slain for defending the faith. This captain, teacher, and martyr was so respected by the people that they named both a valley and a city in his honor (see Alma 2:20; 6:7).

Alma 1:13–15. What Is an *Ignominious* Death?

- Nehor was put to death for murdering Gideon. The scriptures say "he suffered an ignominious death" (Alma 1:15), which means "very shameful; reproachful; dishonorable" (*Noah Webster's First Edition of an American Dictionary of the English Language, 1828* [1967]).

Alma 1:17–18. Capital Punishment

- The law of God is "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed" (Genesis 9:6). In 1889 the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles prepared a declaration regarding the Church's position on capital punishment:

"We solemnly make the following declarations, viz.:

"That this Church views the shedding of human blood with the utmost abhorrence. That we regard the killing of human beings, except in conformity with the civil law, as a capital crime which should be punished by shedding the blood of the criminal, after a public trial before a legally constituted court of the land. . . .

"The revelations of God to this Church make death the penalty for capital crime, and require that offenders against life and property shall be delivered up to and tried by the laws of the land" ("Official Declaration," *Millennial Star*, Jan. 20, 1890, 33–34).

Alma 1:19–20, 25. Enduring Persecution

- Those who follow the teachings of Jesus Christ have always faced persecution. President Harold B. Lee

(1899–1973) admonished those who are persecuted neither to allow their trials to stop their spiritual progression nor to deter their righteous zeal:



“To be persecuted for righteousness sake in a great cause where truth and virtue and honor are at stake is god-like. . . . The great harm that may come from persecution is not from the persecution itself but from the possible effect it may have upon

the persecuted who may thereby be deterred in their zeal for the righteousness of their cause. Much of that persecution comes from lack of understanding, for men are prone to oppose that which they do not comprehend. Some of it comes from men intent upon evil. But from whatever cause, persecution seems to be so universal against those engaged in a righteous cause. . . .

“. . . If you stand firmly for the right despite the jeers of the crowd or even physical violence, you shall be crowned with the blessedness of eternal joy. Who knows but that again in our day some of the saints or even apostles, as in former days, may be required to give their lives in defense of the truth? If that time should come, God grant they would not fail!”
(Decisions for Successful Living [1973], 61–62).

ALMA 1:26

How did the priests regard those they taught? Why is this attitude important when we are teaching others?

Alma 1:26. “The Priests Left Their Labor to Impart the Word of God”

- In Alma 1, note Mormon’s comparison between the pride of Nehor and the humble priests from the church of God. Nehor wore “very costly apparel,” preached “for the sake of riches,” and was lifted up in the pride of his heart, believing he was superior to others (see

Alma 1:5–6, 16). On the other hand, the true priests did not wear costly apparel, taught out of a desire to see others improve without monetary compensation, labored with their hands for their own support, and did not esteem themselves above their hearers (see Alma 1:26–27; see also Mosiah 18:24; 27:5). Throughout the Book of Mormon various apostate groups adopted the teachings or order of Nehor (see Alma 1:16; 16:1–12). This order exalted their so-called spiritual leaders to the point of creating an elite priestly class and social ranks among the people. These self-appointed elites often exploited the lay population and persecuted the poor (see Mosiah 11:3–6; 23:39; 24:8–9; Alma 31:23–32:5). In contrast, Alma 1:26 teaches that the Lord’s way is to call a lay ministry of priesthood leaders.

Alma 1:26–31. The Affairs of the Church Established

- President James E. Faust (1920–2007) of the First Presidency explained that establishing the Lord’s Church requires more than performing baptisms:

“We recognize that the process of establishing the Lord’s church encompasses much more than baptizing people. In the first chapter of Alma in the Book of Mormon we find an instructive sequence of events outlining the way by which the Lord’s church is established. . . .

“Let us take note of this process:

“First, the doctrines are taught [see Alma 1:26].

“Second, members esteem each other as themselves (see v. 26).

“Third, they all labor; they work and earn that which they receive (see v. 26).



“Fourth, they impart of their substance to the less fortunate; they serve one another (see v. 27).

“Fifth, they discipline their own appetites while at the same time caring appropriately for their own needs (see v. 27). . . .

“This mighty change happened, not because the people were given things, but rather because they were

taught and began to help themselves and to care for those who were less fortunate. It was when they gave of themselves in the Lord’s way that their circumstances began to improve.

“This process of establishing the Church can apply anywhere” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1979, 133–34; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1979, 91).

Alma 1:27. Dress and Appearance

- The Book of Mormon repeatedly warns against the sins of pride and class distinction that are manifest when people begin to wear “very costly apparel” (Alma 1:6). Members of the Lord’s Church have been counseled to avoid extremes in clothing and appearance. They also should avoid becoming preoccupied with expensive fashions (see D&C 42:40). Nevertheless, disciples of Christ are to be “neat and comely” (Alma 1:27).



The *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet states: “When you are well groomed and modestly dressed, you invite the companionship of the Spirit. . . . Always be neat and clean and avoid being sloppy or inappropriately casual in dress, grooming, and manners. Ask yourself, ‘Would I feel comfortable with my appearance if I were in the Lord’s presence?’” ([2001], 15–16).

ALMA 2:4

Why did Amlici want to be king? What did he do when the majority of the people voted against him? (see Alma 2:7–10).

Alma 2:4–6. The Voice of the People

- Amlici’s attempt to deprive the people of their religious rights and privileges was defeated by the voice of the people. Consider the result if righteous Nephites in Amlici’s day had abstained from voting. In democratic nations of our day, every Latter-day Saint has a sacred obligation to vote and to influence his or her society for good by upholding honest, wise, good, and honorable leaders and laws (see D&C 98:10).

- Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles encouraged us to raise our voices against the wicked trends in our day: “We need to remember Edmund Burke’s statement: ‘The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.’ We need to raise our voices with other concerned citizens throughout the world in opposition to current trends. We need to tell the sponsors of offensive media that we have had enough. We need to support programs and products that are positive and uplifting. Joining together with neighbors and friends who share our concerns, we can send a clear message to those responsible. The Internet Web sites and their local affiliates will have their addresses. Letters and e-mails have more effect than most people realize” (in Conference Report, Oct. 2003, 17; or *Ensign*, Nov. 2003, 18).

Alma 2:28–31. Alma and the Nephites Were Strengthened by God

- Previously the Lord had promised the Nephites that He would sustain them against the Lamanites if they were righteous (see 2 Nephi 5:25). Consequently, in the time of their greatest need, the Nephites called upon God and were “strengthened by the hand of the Lord” (Alma 2:28). During the same battle, God “strengthened” Alma with the ability to defeat his enemies, in response to his faith (see Alma 2:30–31).

Alma 3:4. The Amlicites Marked Their Bodies

- The Amlicites “marked themselves with red in their foreheads” to distinguish themselves from the Nephites (Alma 3:4, 18). In our time, President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) admonished young men and women to keep their bodies sacred by not marking themselves with tattoos:

“Now comes the craze of tattooing one’s body. I cannot understand why any young man—or young woman, for that matter—would wish to undergo the painful process of disfiguring the skin with various multicolored representations of people, animals, and various symbols. With tattoos, the process is permanent unless there is another painful and costly undertaking to remove it. Fathers, caution your sons against having their bodies tattooed. They may resist your talk now, but the time will come when they will thank you. A tattoo is graffiti on the temple of the body.

“Likewise the piercing of the body for multiple rings in the ears, in the nose, even in the tongue. Can they possibly think that is beautiful? . . . The First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve have declared that we discourage tattoos and also ‘the piercing of the body for other than medical purposes.’ We do not, however, take any position ‘on the minimal piercing of the ears by women for one pair of earrings’—one pair” (in Conference Report, Oct. 2000, 70–71; or *Ensign*, Nov. 2000, 52).

Alma 3:5. The Amlicites Changed Their Appearance to Follow the Lamanites

- The Amlicites changed their appearance to look like the Lamanites. Many Latter-day Saints today feel pressured to follow the dress trends of the world. Extremes in clothing and appearance serve to distinguish the disobedient from the disciples of Jesus Christ. Those who follow these worldly trends “disobey the prophet and, instead, follow the fads of the world” (see “Questions and Answers,” *New Era*, Mar. 2006, 14; *For the Strength of Youth*, 14–16).

- Elder M. Russell Ballard taught young men who hold the priesthood that worldly trends in dress and appearance will chase away the Spirit of the Lord:

“There is an entire subculture that celebrates contemporary gangs and their criminal conduct with music, clothing styles, language, attitudes, and behaviors. Many of you have watched as trendy friends have embraced the style as something that was ‘fashionable’ and ‘cool,’ only to be dragged into the subculture. . . .

“. . . I do not believe that you can stand for truth and right while wearing anything that is unbecoming one who holds the priesthood of God” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1997, 51–53; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1997, 38–39).

Alma 3:6–15. The Mark and the Curse

- There is a difference between the mark and the curse. The mark placed upon the Lamanites was a dark skin (see Alma 3:6). The curse was not the dark skin but being “cut off from the presence of the Lord” (2 Nephi 5:20). Notice that in both Alma 3:7 and Alma 3:14 the conjunction *and* is used between the curse *and* the mark. This implies that they are not the same thing. The people brought the curse upon themselves: “And even so doth every man that is cursed bring upon himself his own condemnation” (Alma 3:19). Through righteousness the curse may be removed, but the mark may remain as it has with the Lamanites (see commentary for 2 Nephi 5:20–25 on p. 62).

ALMA 3:14–19

What prophecy did Nephi give that was fulfilled by the Amlicites marking themselves?

Alma 3:26–27. “Every Man Receiveth Wages of Him Whom He Listeth to Obey”

- The phrase “every man receiveth wages of him whom he listeth to obey” figuratively invites the reader to consider himself as an employee whose choices determine whether his ultimate employer is God or Satan (see Alma 3:27). In this context, the word *list* refers to leaning or tilting to one side or another. Therefore, those who tilt or lean toward Satan soon find themselves employed by him and receive “eternal misery” (Alma 3:26).

Eventually, the choices of a lifetime will reveal whom one has chosen as an eternal employer. President Boyd K. Packer, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, taught this truth when he declared: “Our lives are made up of thousands of everyday choices. Over the years these little choices will be bundled together

and show clearly what we value” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1980, 29; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1980, 21).

Alma 4:9–12. “A Great Stumbling-Block”

- As Church members became proud, their negative examples became a stumbling-block to those who did not belong to the Church (see Alma 4:9–12; 39:11). President Gordon B. Hinckley related the story of a young man who faced terrible odds to learn about the gospel because of the way Church members treated him:

“He was not a member of the Church. He and his parents were active in another faith.

“He recalls that when he was growing up, some of his LDS associates belittled him, made him feel out of place, and poked fun at him.

“He came to literally hate this Church and its people. He saw no good in any of them.

“Then his father lost his employment and had to move. In the new location, at the age of 17, he was able to enroll in college. There, for the first time in his life, he felt the warmth of friends, one of whom, named Richard, asked him to join a club of which he was president. He writes:

“‘For the first time in my life someone wanted me around. I didn’t know how to react, but thankfully I joined. . . . It was a feeling that I loved, the feeling of having a friend. I had prayed for one my whole life. And now after 17 years of waiting, God answered that prayer.’

“At the age of 19 he found himself as a tent partner with Richard during their summer employment. He noticed Richard reading a book every night. He asked what he was reading. He was told that he was reading the Book of Mormon. He adds:

“‘I quickly changed the subject and went to bed. After all, that is the book that ruined my childhood. I tried forgetting about it, but a week went by and I couldn’t sleep. Why was he reading it every night? I soon couldn’t stand the unanswered questions in my head. So one night I asked him what was so important in that book. What was in it? . . . He started to read where he had stopped. He read about Jesus and about an

appearance in the Americas. I was shocked. I didn’t think that the Mormons believed in Jesus.’ . . .

“On a subsequent occasion this young man and his friend were traveling. Richard handed him a Book of Mormon and asked that he read it aloud. He did so, and suddenly the inspiration of the Holy Spirit touched him.

“Time passed and his faith increased. He agreed to be baptized. . . .

“That is the end of the story, but there are great statements in that story. One is the sorry manner in which his young Mormon associates treated him.

“Next is the manner in which his newfound friend, Richard, treated him. It was totally opposite from his previous experience. It led to his conversion and baptism in the face of terrible odds” (in Conference Report, Apr. 2006, 62–63; or *Ensign*, May 2006, 59–60).

Alma 4:14. Retaining a Remission of Sins

- The Book of Mormon not only teaches that through the Atonement of Jesus Christ you can receive a remission of your sins, but it also teaches that you must



retain a remission of your sins (see Alma 4:14; also Mosiah 4:11). President Marion G. Romney (1897–1988) of the First Presidency taught that being true to our covenants and caring for others allows us to retain a remission of our sins: “Is there any doubt that retaining a remission of sins depends on our caring for one another? If we believe these teachings, if we profess to

follow the Savior and his prophets, if we want to be true to our covenants and have the Spirit of the Lord in our lives, then we must do the things that the Savior said and did” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1980, 136; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1980, 92).

ALMA 4:15–19

*Why did Alma give up the judgment-seat?
What can you learn from his example?*

Alma 4:19. Bearing Pure Testimony

- In order to reclaim the people, Alma knew that “the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else” (Alma 31:5). President Gordon B. Hinckley emphasized the world’s need to hear pure testimonies:

“You will recall that Alma gave up the judgment seat so that he might have time and strength for a greater work: [Alma 4:19]

“For this same reason, the world today needs the power of pure testimony. It needs the gospel of Jesus Christ, and if the world is to hear that gospel, there must be messengers to teach it” (“There Must Be Messengers,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1987, 2).

- Elder M. Russell Ballard counseled Latter-day Saints to bear pure testimony:

“Simply stated, testimony—real testimony, born of the Spirit and confirmed by the Holy Ghost—changes lives. It changes how you think and what you do. It changes what you say. It affects every priority you set and every choice you make. . . .

“My experience throughout the Church leads me to worry that too many of our members’ testimonies linger on ‘I am thankful’ and ‘I love,’ and too few are able to say with humble but sincere clarity, ‘I know.’ As a result, our meetings sometimes lack the testimony-rich, spiritual underpinnings that stir the soul and have meaningful, positive impact on the lives of all those who hear them.

“Our testimony meetings need to be more centered on the Savior, the doctrines of the gospel, the blessings of the Restoration, and the teachings of the scriptures. We need to replace stories, travelogues, and lectures with pure testimonies. . . .

“. . . To bear testimony is ‘to bear witness by the power of the Holy Ghost; to make a solemn declaration of truth based on personal knowledge or belief’ (Guide to the Scriptures, “Testify”). Clear declaration of truth makes a difference in people’s lives. That is what changes hearts. That is what the Holy Ghost can confirm in the hearts of God’s children.

“Although we can have testimonies of many things as members of the Church, there are basic truths we need to constantly teach one another and share with those not of our faith. Testify that God is our Father and Jesus is the Christ. The plan of salvation is centered on the Savior’s Atonement. Joseph Smith restored the fulness of the everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ, and the Book of Mormon is evidence that



our testimony is true” (in Conference Report, Oct. 2004, 42–43; or *Ensign*, Nov. 2004, 40–41).

- President Howard W. Hunter (1907–1995) offered a caution with regard to emotions in testimonies:

“Let me offer a word of caution on this subject. . . . I get concerned when it appears that strong emotion or free-flowing tears are equated with the presence of the Spirit. Certainly the Spirit of the Lord can bring strong emotional feelings, including tears, but that outward manifestation ought not to be confused with the presence of the Spirit itself.

“I have watched a great many of my brethren over the years and we have shared some rare and unspeakable spiritual experiences together. Those experiences have all been different, each special in its own way, and such sacred moments may or may not be accompanied by tears. Very often they are, but sometimes they are accompanied by total silence” (“Eternal Investments”

[an evening with President Howard W. Hunter, Feb. 10, 1989], 3, www.ldsces.org).

Points to Ponder

- Why do you think the Book of Mormon repeatedly warns against wearing “costly apparel” (Alma 1:6, 27, 32) and focusing on material possessions? What are some current styles, fashions, or trends that Latter-day Saints should avoid?
- How can you use your voice to defend the standards, rights, and privileges of the Church today?

Suggested Assignments

- Read Alma 1–4, marking all the verses that refer to riches, costly clothing, and the vain things of the world. Note the effect that their display of wealth had on the righteousness of members of the Church. Write a three- to five-minute talk on principles that

Church members can follow to keep themselves from experiencing negative spiritual effects from materialism.

- Compare Alma 1:3–6, 16–20 to Alma 31:12–29 and make a list of the similarities. Why did Nehor’s teachings and the apostate Zoramite’s religion appeal to so many?
- In the heat of battle, Alma cried to God for assistance (see Alma 2:30). In response to Alma’s faith, God “strengthened” him with the ability to defeat his enemies (Alma 2:31). Find at least two other experiences in the Book of Mormon where God strengthened others. Think of a time when you have been strengthened by the Lord, and record the experience in your journal, if you have not already written about it.