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Gerald Hansen, Jr.

Only faithful and righteous individuals could have been privileged to witness the events of the first day of the Lord's visit to the Nephites. On that day the 2,500 people who were gathered at the temple in Bountiful heard the Father bear witness of the Son and touched the Savior's wounds. They listened to his teachings on his doctrine, the lost sheep, and the Sermon at Bountiful. They saw him heal their sick and afflicted and heard him pray things that could not be recorded. They watched the Lord weep and angels minister to their little children. And finally they partook of the sacrament as Jesus administered it, and they received instructions from him concerning that ordinance.

The spiritual intensity of the experiences of the first day required a people prepared by their faith and righteousness to receive them. The people in 3 Nephi had lived through persecution, had survived the great destruction, and were gathered at the temple conversing and pondering about God. Moroni tells us these Nephites saw Christ because of their faith (Ether 12:7). Elder Bruce R. McConkie explains that they "were qualified by personal righteousness to see the face of their God" (*Promised Messiah* 609).

If it is a fact that the Nephites who saw Christ were spiritually prepared and mature in their righteousness in the

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gospel, then, in some ways, an intriguing aspect of the Savior's visit is that in spite of their preparation they were not taught all of the doctrine of the gathering of Israel until the second day. As he began to explain this doctrine (3 Nephi 16), Jesus perceived they could not understand all his words and admonished them to go home to ponder what he had taught them and prepare to be given even more:

I perceive that ye are weak, that ye cannot understand all my words which I am commanded of the Father to speak unto you at this time. Therefore, go ye unto your homes, and ponder upon the things which I have said, and ask of the Father, in my name, that ye may understand, and prepare your minds for the morrow, and I come unto you again. (17:2–3)

The need for additional preparation is obviously not because they were spiritually slow, because before they went home Jesus shared with them some high-level spiritual experiences: he healed their sick, prayed unutterable prayers, had angels minister to the children, and gave them the sacrament (3 Nephi 17–18). Their difficulty in understanding the gathering seems to have had more to do with their lack of intellectual understanding of the doctrine itself. The gathering of Israel is a profound doctrine filled with implications about God, his plan, and our place in it. It reminds members of the kingdom of God that they are a covenant people and implies that they will be saved only by keeping those covenants.

Basic Principles of the Gathering

One of the things that makes the gathering difficult to grasp as a teaching is its subtlety. The simple part of the gathering—that certain peoples gather to certain lands—can, if we are not careful, camouflage its deeper implications. The gospel principle of the gathering of Israel goes far beyond where we will live. Among other things, it teaches Latter-day Saints about their responsibilities in the Lord's plan, and it emphasizes that exaltation requires temple ordinances. It is a joyful doctrine taught

repeatedly by both Old Testament and Nephite prophets to lift up the downtrodden and to bear witness to God's eventual victory. Or, as Jacob says in the Book of Mormon, he teaches concerning the gathering so that we will "not hang down our heads," but "cheer up [our] hearts" (2 Nephi 10:20, 23).

A further difficulty for us today in understanding the gathering is a lack of some historical perspective and background knowledge. When the Savior taught the Nephites the doctrine of the gathering, he assumed that they had read their scriptures and already knew concerning such things as the scatterings of Israel and, most importantly, the Abrahamic covenant. As for the scatterings, Jesus mentioned them (3 Nephi 20:13, 27) but did not emphasize them. The Nephites had been taught that God generally scattered Israel after the Israelites had broken their covenants (Hel 7:17–19). Similarly, with the Nephites, Christ only alluded to the Abrahamic covenant without explaining it in detail (3 Nephi 20:25, 27). However, as Latter-day Saints we cannot neglect the covenant God made with Abraham if we have even the least desire to understand the gathering of Israel. Unless we understand what the covenant of Abraham promises to us today, we will probably see the gathering of Israel as nothing more than certain peoples going to certain lands. In reality, the blessings of Abraham—not land—are the central promise of the gathering. We gather to the blessings of Abraham. They are the keys that open the door to salvation. And, understanding these blessings is the key that opens the door to comprehending the doctrine of the gathering.

Scripture tells us that Abraham "sought for the blessings of the fathers, and the right to be ordained to administer the same" (Abr 1:2). He was not seeking land, and he was not seeking priesthood office, as we sometimes hear. He was seeking, as President Ezra Taft Benson says, priesthood blessings, meaning temple blessings (8). The most important part of the Abrahamic covenant, both for Abraham and for us, is the gift of temple covenants and blessings.

Gathering for Temple Blessings

“Gathering,” in the highest sense of the word, means to receive the same temple blessings that Abraham received. Gathering to “lands” is primarily for the purpose of gathering to locations where we have or will build temples. As Joseph Smith said, the main object of gathering the people of God in any age to certain places is “to build unto the Lord a house whereby He could reveal unto His people the ordinances of His house and the glories of His kingdom, and teach the people the way of salvation” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 307–308; hereafter *TPJS*). Early in this dispensation God told the members of the Church to gather to Kirtland so, among other things, they could be “endowed with power from on high” (D&C 38:32). The endowment of power came with the restoration in the Kirtland temple of some of the ordinances and all of the keys to temple blessings (see D&C 110). When we left Kirtland the place of gathering changed. For much of this dispensation we gathered to Utah. Today the place of gathering is to the stakes of Zion in our native lands (see Lee 5). The place is relatively unimportant. The real gathering occurs when we make the same covenants and receive the same blessings as Abraham.

As Latter-day Saints, we understand that many other churches and philosophies can make us moral and good and that the Lord expects from us a more complete level of discipleship. We understand that being honest and chaste, keeping the word of wisdom, and paying tithing are things we do as part of our preparation for going to the temple; but we cannot be exalted without temple blessings. We understand that there are pseudo-gospels like the gospel of positive thinking, the gospel of self-esteem, and the gospel of winning friends and influencing people, to name a few, that can, if we are not careful, become substitutes for Christ’s gospel and cause us to lose sight of God’s higher expectations. We understand, as Professor Hugh Nibley reminds us, that “the gospel is more than a catalogue of moral platitudes” (59). If we do not understand, or if we forget

these things, we have God's servants to remind us of our covenants, as when Elder Neal A. Maxwell warns of "'honorable' members who are skimming over the surface" who "may even pass through our temples but, alas, they do not let the temples pass through them" ("Hearts" 65). God expects not just goodness but consecration and sanctification through covenant.

Through the ordinances and covenants of the temple, we learn what we have to do to be saved. The scriptures say, "It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance" (D&C 131:6). Ignorance of what? *The Lectures on Faith* says ignorance of what God is like (see Lecture 7:99–104). This knowledge, ultimately, can only be received after reception of the temple ordinances. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that the temple blessings make us eligible to learn "the mysteries of the kingdom, even . . . the knowledge of God. . . . And without the ordinances . . . the power of godliness is not manifest to men in the flesh" (D&C 84:19–21). Through the temple ordinances, we make covenants that, if kept, show to God that we can be trusted with his knowledge and his power. The covenants of the temple ordinances are, therefore, the keys that open the doors to the revelations of godliness if we desire them, ask for them, and are worthy. Without the temple covenants we do not get this kind of knowledge. Without this kind of knowledge and its proper use, we will not be exalted, because "this is eternal lives—to know God, and Jesus Christ" (D&C 132:24). Given this understanding, Jesus' reason for the gathering, as explained to the Nephites, that Israel "shall be brought to the knowledge of the Lord their God" (3 Nephi 20:13) comes as no great surprise. Israel will gather so that Israel can receive the blessings of Abraham (the temple blessings), so that Israel can receive the mysteries of godliness that will save them. These are the blessings, or "the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal" that Abraham and his posterity were to make available to the world (Abr 2:11).

Having assumed a background knowledge, the Savior begins his sermon to the Nephites with the basic message of the

gathering: that scattered Israel will be gathered from among the nations of the world, come to a knowledge of God, and be gathered to the lands of their inheritance; also, that the Gentiles who have been blessed by God and who have scattered Israel must repent or be cut off from among God's people (3 Nephi 20:11–21). This basic message is always meant to give to the righteous hope of eventual victory and vindication. But both parts of the message also presuppose a pre-earth life, a plan of conversion developed and established by God for the nations of the earth, and God's omniscience in that plan. In short, the message presupposes a deep love by God for his children and the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Gathering and the Premortal Existence

The plan for the gathering is based on our premortal existence and God's knowledge of it. Abraham tells us that some of the spirits in the premortal existence were noble and great ones (Abr 3:23). Obviously, if some spirits were noble and great, other spirits were less noble in developing their spiritual capabilities. However, the Father loves all his children and desires to save them all. In his omniscience he devised a plan by which each of his children would come to the earth at the time and place and with the right amount of opportunities that would maximize their ability to accept the plan of salvation. Elder Neal A. Maxwell explains this principle in these terms: "It does no violence even to our frail human logic to observe that there cannot be a grand plan of salvation for all mankind, unless there is also a plan for each individual. The salvational sum will reflect all its parts" ("Determined Discipleship" 71).

For some spirits this meant they would receive an opportunity to have the gospel in this life, while for others it meant they would wait until the spirit world for that opportunity. For some it meant the extra responsibility of serving in the government in God's kingdom and bearing the message of salvation to the world (*TPJS* 365). For others it meant coming to earth at

a time when and in a place where the gospel was not available but coming to prepare a people with a certain portion of the light. Such were the missions of Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster, Socrates, and Plato according to Orson F. Whitney. Speaking of these individuals he said, “They were servants of the Lord in a lesser sense, and were sent to those pagan or heathen nations to give them the measure of truth that a wise Providence had allotted to them” (33). This concept is supported by the First Presidency statement of 15 February 1978. The Father’s plan means these things and many more—some that are difficult if not impossible for us to understand without the omniscience of God. We are not, for instance, generally given a knowledge of the relationship between other people’s premortal existence and their earthly circumstances.

The Gathering Testifies of God’s Plan

What we can understand is that the gathering testifies to a plan of God, that he does not gather all his children all the time, that there are periods of time meant for the gathering of Israel and periods for the Gentiles, and that there are periods of apostasy as prophesied, and all of this is in God’s plan. He knows the right time and means for sending the gospel to each of us. Alma teaches this principle in these terms: “The Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8). The temple is the great equalizer in this plan. Whether the time to hear the gospel is in this life or in the next, if it is accepted, the reward is the same, exaltation (see the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, Matt 20:1-16). Work for the dead in the temple makes that possible. Our challenge is to not concern ourselves with why a person’s mortal circumstances are what they are (we cannot know that anyway), but to figure out our part in God’s plan and do it, to render service in the truest sense of the word: bring souls to Christ through the

ordinances by preaching the gospel, perfecting the Saints, and redeeming the dead.

To believe these principles requires trust, or faith, in God. To those who have this faith, the doctrine of the gathering becomes a powerful support, knowing as they do that in eternal ways righteousness is rewarded. The explanation in 3 Nephi of the gathering provides this support to the Nephites. It includes them within the walls of the house of Israel and promises them the attendant blessings. Jesus said to them, “Ye are the children of the prophets; and ye are of the house of Israel; and ye are of the covenant which the Father made with your fathers” (3 Nephi 20:25). He promised them that their descendants would be established in this land and it would be a New Jerusalem (3 Nephi 20:22). However, those descendants who fell away from the covenants would first be scattered by Gentiles. Christ also stated that the Gentiles of this land will be held accountable if they reject the fulness of the gospel when it is preached to them (3 Nephi 20:22–31).

The good news-bad news part of the message, blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, still testifies of God’s love (D&C 130:20–21). Alma suggests earlier in the Book of Mormon that being compelled to be humble can be a blessing when it leads to repentance (Alma 32:13). What matters most is that we are brought to repentance, and eventually to salvation, whether the reason for the repentance be our own humility or God’s chastisement.

Place of the Gentiles in the Gathering

After Christ applies his teachings to the Nephites and Lamanites, he introduces a broadened explanation of the place of the Gentiles in the gathering by quoting Isaiah (3 Nephi 20:27–28). Much confusion exists over the definition of Gentile. In the Book of Mormon, the Gentiles are those who believed in Jesus Christ “in and of the Holy Ghost” (16:6) and not by a personal visit of Christ, since he was not sent but to the

house of Israel (Matt 10:5; 15:24). Those of the house of Israel who had been scattered among the Gentiles are also identified with the Gentiles (D&C 109:60). As Elder Bruce R. McConkie explains, “This [definition] classifies Ephraim and the rest of scattered Israel as Gentiles” (*Millennial Messiah* 221–22). Under this definition the Nephites are part of Israel while Joseph Smith is a Gentile (see 1 Nephi 13:33–42; 15:13–20; 2 Nephi 30:3). But this definition is only one of several ways to look at the matter. In fact, in one sense of the word, everyone is a Gentile until he or she receives the ordinances and becomes spiritually born again, a spiritually begotten son or daughter of God. In this way we become sons and daughters of Abraham, no longer Gentiles (see 2 Nephi 30:2; 3 Nephi 16:6–13; Abr 2:10; D&C 84:33–34).

In 3 Nephi, Christ stays consistent with the normal Book of Mormon definition. He prophesies, expounding on Isaiah’s poetry, of the restoration of the gospel among the Gentiles through Joseph Smith, and of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 21:1–11). He testifies that the descendants of the Nephites and Lamanites would hear of Christ through these means and be gathered through acceptance of the restored gospel (v 26). He warns the Gentiles of our day that if they reject the gospel they will be cut off from his people (v 20). Yet he also witnesses that if they stay true to the kingdom of God they will assist Israel in building New Jerusalem (vv 22–23).

For Latter-day Saints this material is especially significant. We are those identified with the Gentiles who must take the gospel to the descendants of the Nephites. We have an obligation to preach the gospel and build Zion. We learn that there is a penalty for not fulfilling our obligation, but that the kingdom is ours if we keep our covenants.

Christ Quotes Isaiah on the Gathering

At this point in his sermon, Christ follows up his quotation and explanation of Isaiah with another quote from Isaiah that

emphasizes the coming of the kingdom and the eventual victory of Israel in the scattering and gathering (3 Nephi 22). Like much of the rest of Isaiah this gives hope and encouragement to those sometimes lonely and sometimes persecuted members of the Church who strive with all their might, mind, and strength to further the kingdom of God, yet are ridiculed, accused of self-righteousness, and taunted by others, even by others within the Church who should know better. Isaiah promises them that the gathering will mean victory for Christ and relief for those who are reproached and afflicted (22:4, 11).

After quoting Isaiah, Christ does something that seems out of place in a discourse on the gathering: he insists that the Nephites include in their scripture a prophecy of the resurrection made earlier by Samuel (3 Nephi 23:6–14). But if we try to view the total picture of the Savior's teachings, we may see that there is reason to include this prophecy in this sermon. The blessings of the covenants that we gather to receive, the temple blessings, are blessings to be given, for the most part, in the resurrection. The prophecy of Samuel stands as a firm witness of the reality of the resurrection and, therefore, also witnesses that we can have faith in the promises of the covenant.

Christ Quotes Malachi on Gathering to Temples

The finale to the recorded portion of Christ's discourse, the capstone of his sermon, is his quotation of Malachi 3–4 (3 Nephi 24–25). In these chapters, Malachi testifies that the Lord will come again: the punishment of the wicked and the triumph of the righteous are a reality. He tells us to hold on, that the Lord is coming to right all wrongs. These chapters also show why some people will not abide the coming of the Lord: they are sorcerers, adulterers, false swearers; they oppress the hireling in his wages, the downtrodden and the stranger, and do not fear God; they do not pay their tithes and offerings; and they think it is in vain to serve God. In short, Malachi says, they have not been true to their ordinances (24:5, 7–8, 14). Finally, these

chapters tell us we must gather to do our temple ordinances or there is no exaltation. Few verses of scripture would be more appropriate to complete our understanding of the gathering than those in these two chapters.

They begin: “Behold, I will send you my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom ye seek shall come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant” (3 Nephi 24:1). The messenger of these verses is the everlasting covenant of the gospel as restored by Joseph Smith (D&C 45:9), and it was at least partially fulfilled when the Lord appeared in the temple in Kirtland in 1836, where the keys to his covenant were restored (D&C 110). After this announcement, Malachi asks who it is that will abide the presence of the Lord at the second coming and then gives a long list, as already noted, of non-tithe payers, adulterers, oppressors, and others who will not keep their covenants and who will, therefore, be destroyed. Finally, the prophet ends with those oft-quoted verses concerning Elijah and the hearts of the children (3 Nephi 25:5–6).

Moroni gave a plainer translation of these verses to Joseph Smith centuries later that for us greatly clarifies their meaning (see JS-H 1:38–39). In Moroni’s version we learn that Elijah’s task is to reveal the patriarchal priesthood, or as Joseph Smith explained, “the revelations, ordinances, oracles, powers and endowments of the fulness of the Melchizedek Priesthood”—the highest of temple blessings (*TPJS* 322–23, 337). We also learn that this revelation through Elijah will turn the hearts of the children to the promises of the fathers, which means they will seek after the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which blessings are the temple covenants. In other words, they will desire to gather to the family of God by receiving and keeping the blessings of the fathers. The Malachi quotation as used by the Savior effectively places the gathering in its spiritual context and is therefore an essential element in the Savior’s overall teachings on the gathering.

This spiritual context means that the scattering and gathering of Israel does not apply only to ancient peoples. Each Saint

of the latter days can be scattered and gathered on an individual basis. By faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and receiving the temple ordinances and covenants we gather to the family of God. By sin and disobedience, particularly disobedience to the temple covenants, we scatter ourselves from the blessings of God and ultimately from his presence. As a symbol of repentance the gathering of Israel bears witness of Christ and the necessity of his atonement.

Conclusion

The rest of what Christ taught on the second day of his visit is not recorded. What is said is that he expounded all things from the beginning to the end (3 Nephi 26:3–5). Though the account does not elaborate on what was said, these teachings could well be part of Christ’s efforts to explain the full context of the gathering within the plan of redemption known to God.

It will not be enough for us to be good, honorable individuals—that only makes us eligible for the terrestrial kingdom (D&C 76:75, 79). Neither will it be enough to bribe God by simply being busy in the Church, nor can we buy our way into heaven by doing good deeds; we will have to know God and be like him (JST Matt 7:33). As Joseph Smith said, “If you wish to go where God is, you must be like God, or possess the principles which God possesses” (*TPJS* 216). This means receiving the temple ordinances and covenants that make us eligible for the knowledge of God, keeping our covenants, asking to know his will for us, and then doing it. Exaltation depends on how well we learn this process (D&C 121:34–36).

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