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## Preparing for the Judgment

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## *Preparing for the Judgment*

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# 8

Gerald Hansen, Jr.

**T**he power of the Book of Mormon to move us closer to God comes largely from the stark contrast of its two main messages. On almost every page, the prophets preach the positive and preeminent message of overcoming the world through hope in Christ. On the other hand, their constant reminder of judgment for the wicked never allows us to relax or be comfortable in sin. These two messages reach their greatest intensity in the nine chapters known also as the book of Mormon in the Book of Mormon. (To avoid confusion with the Book of Mormon, these nine chapters will hereafter be referred to as Mormon's book.) Mormon's book demands that we pay attention to the teachings of the entire Book of Mormon because it contains the account of the final destruction of the Nephites—a terrifying symbol that men and women will be judged for their sins. More specifically, Mormon's book pushes us to examine the types of materialism that caused the Nephites to be destroyed. It presses us to use the Book of Mormon to see through the lies of this world, while urging us to find hope in Christ. Without Mormon's book, the teachings on materialism in the rest of the Book of Mormon, though correct, lack leverage, much like a parent who constantly threatens to discipline but never does. With Mormon's book we are brought to acknowledge that God will hold us accountable for the choices we make, just as he did the Nephites. Our analysis of the power of Mormon's book to move us to acknowledge the Book of Mormon's attack on materialism must begin with the destruction of the Nephites.

Mormon does not record the Nephites' destruction just because it fulfills prophecy or for his readers' information only (see 1 Nephi 12:20; Alma 45:10–11). Rather, his description of the extinction of

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his people at Cumorah graphically illustrates the truth that “the wages of sin [are] death” (Rom 6:23). It rouses our curiosity to look for the exact cause of their annihilation and, thereby, stimulates us to pay attention to the portrait Mormon paints of his own people. He says his society was one in which the Holy Ghost did not function and, consequently, there were no spiritual gifts. Secret combinations seeking power and money abounded. People sought answers to life’s questions from unholy sources such as sorcery. The power of evil (probably meaning false philosophies and life-styles) was rampant everywhere (Mormon 1:14–19). Because of the wars and atrocities, caused by gangs within and the Lamanites without, the entire nation of Nephites began to complain and mourn. They were terrified by the problems they faced and sorry that they had to face them. But they would not turn to God or seek the real solution, which is repentance. They sought for happiness in wickedness, but life became miserable, and some felt it was not worth living. They blamed God for their problems and did not have access to his spirit (2:8–26). After success in a couple of wars they bragged about their military abilities and even swore to avenge themselves against their enemies with military solutions (3:9). All in all, Nephite society during this time was a sick one, heading to its death.

In case we missed the point of Mormon’s description of the Nephites’ wickedness, Moroni adds a second witness of our need for repentance by prophesying of the most problematic types of wickedness existing in our day. He says our day is one of secret combinations, pride and envying in churches, wars, pollutions, murders, robbing, lying, deceivings, and whoredoms; it is a day of false philosophies that excuse sin and build churches to get gain; it is a day where men and women love money and fine apparel, which causes envying, strife, malice and persecutions; it is a day where we care more about adorning churches than we do about taking care of the poor, needy, sick, and afflicted; a day where we seek the praise of the world, and oppress the downtrodden and the righteous (Mormon 8:24–41). Moroni’s teaching is clear: just as the Nephites were destroyed because they did not repent of the wickedness described by Mormon, we face destruction and judgment unless we repent of our sins, some of which Moroni described.

The account of the destruction of the Nephites insists that we see the consequences of following the world’s enticements instead of

God's commandments. As a result, this destruction is not meant to be read as just historical fact, but as a metaphor of judgment, a shadow of the everlasting destruction known as second death (see Alma 12:16–17). Mormon makes it obvious that he wants us to understand and feel the destruction of the Nephites on a personal level. For one thing, he spends much more time on their decline and fall than is necessary for a simple history, in contrast to Amaron, who describes an earlier but similar destruction of the Nephites in four verses (Omni 1:4–7). Mormon chooses to use his entire personal record to describe the Nephites' plunge to destruction at Cumorah with an account that moves with the cadence of a funeral dirge. He seems determined that we personally experience a degree of the horror that he felt as he watched his own society deteriorate in wickedness, hoping that we will do all we can to prevent our own destruction. A more obvious key to Mormon's intention is his own words. He tells us point blank that he wants us to repent and prepare for judgment. Addressing both Gentile and Israelite, he says: "And for this cause I write unto you, that ye may know that ye must all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ . . . [and] ye must stand to be judged of your works, whether they be good or evil. . . . And I would that I could persuade all ye ends of the earth to repent and prepare to stand before the judgement-seat of Christ" (Mormon 3:20–22). The depth of Mormon's concern for us comes through not only in this admonition, but also in the fact that he repeats it three more times, twice directly and once indirectly, as he mourns for and chastises the destroyed Nephites (5:12–24; 6:16–22; 7:1–10). As though four warnings are not enough, Moroni, in his portion of Mormon's book, admonishes us in tones even more severe than his father's, demanding to know how we as a society and as individuals can continue in wickedness and still expect a joyful judgment (8:33–41; 9:1–14).

As we read these admonitions today, the most important thing for us to remember, if not the most disturbing, is that the Nephites could have avoided their destruction at Cumorah. They should have known better than to fall into the traps that led to their doom. They not only received continual exhortations from the prophets to repent, but, like us, they also had a record, a warning really, of a people who destroyed themselves through wickedness. The Jaredite record showed that the penalty for disobedience to God for peoples who live on the American continent is destruction (see Alma 37:21–32). With

all these warnings available, one wonders what went wrong. Why didn't the Nephites listen? Did they read their own book? Did they miss its message? Did they take the Jaredite record seriously, or did they view it only as a history book, a record of God's dealings with the people in the ancient promised land? Whatever their attitude, they evidently did not view the record as a warning to themselves. Given the fact that the Nephites neglected to learn from their scriptures, the Book of Mormon becomes for us a double warning, a second witness, a record of two civilizations that God allowed to be destroyed because they disregarded the prophets and records he gave them.

Because the Book of Mormon contains such a warning, any group which has access to it is enormously accountable. The scriptures themselves accentuate this accountability in at least two powerful ways. First, the Doctrine and Covenants reveals that Nephite prophets spent their faith and effort to bring forth the Book of Mormon (D&C 10:46–52). It also reveals that the Book of Mormon was purchased for us at no small cost but by the blood of the modern prophets, Joseph and Hyrum Smith, who died to seal its testimony (135:1, 6). At the judgment bar, God will not lightly dismiss the high price paid to bring the book forth. Second, the Book of Mormon testifies that God will judge the nations that possess the things he writes according to that record (2 Nephi 25:22). In fact, Nephi, Jacob, Mormon, and Moroni, the four most prominent writers of the book, all testify in sobering farewell statements that we will stand with them at the judgment bar of God to answer for what we have done with the teachings of the Book of Mormon (see 2 Nephi 33:10–15; Jacob 6:5–13; Mormon 7:5–10; Moroni 10:24–34). These prophets want us to know that part of our judgment will be based on how well we have used their teachings in our lives.

The high seriousness of the Book of Mormon prophets' warnings should push us to search their record for what led the Nephites to their destruction. From the beginning of the book to the end, these prophets denounce materialism as the source of Nephite wickedness. They said it was materialism more than anything else that caused the wars, persecutions, apostasy, and secret combinations which led finally to annihilation. It seems, for example, to have been the reason for Laman and Lemuel's pride (1 Nephi 2:11; 17:21–22). The Isaiah chapters Nephi quotes attack materialistic attitudes again and again (see 2 Nephi chapters 12–24). Materialism was the source of the wars and

wickedness that caused Alma's abdication as chief judge so he could preach full time (Alma 1:16; 4:8–19). The same is true of the wars and wickedness that caused Nephi<sub>2</sub> to resign as chief judge (Hel 3:33–36; 4:11–12). Mormon says it was this sin that caused the destruction among the Nephites just before the Savior came (3 Nephi 6:10–15), and caused the Nephite slide to wickedness after 200 years of peace (4 Nephi 1:24). Moroni says it, along with pride, was the motivation behind the secret combinations that led to the destruction of the Jaredites and Nephites (Ether 8:21–22).

The value of the Book of Mormon on this issue is hard to overstate. According to President Ezra Taft Benson, the Book of Mormon teaches the perils of materialism better than any other source:

From the Book of Mormon we learn how disciples of Christ live in times of war. From the Book of Mormon we see the evils of secret combinations portrayed in graphic and chilling reality. In the Book of Mormon we find lessons for dealing with persecution and apostasy. We learn much about how to do missionary work. And more than anywhere else, we see in the Book of Mormon the dangers of materialism and setting our hearts on the things of the world. ("The Book" 7)

As this quotation indicates, while the writings of the prophets of the Book of Mormon show great concern for many different problems relevant to our society, they reserve their greatest and most consistent condemnation for those who set their hearts on the things of this world.

We can better understand the inherent danger in this temptation if we first note that the Book of Mormon prophets do not condemn money itself, nor do they expect us to live in poverty. Having enough for our needs, even having more than enough, is not the problem, if we use it for others (see Jacob 2:18–19). God expects us to be responsible in financial affairs and, in most cases, to be self-supporting. This is what the Savior means when he says "make unto yourselves friends with the mammon of unrighteousness, and they will not destroy you" (D&C 82:22). King Benjamin also gives excellent counsel on establishing priorities in monetary matters and governing ourselves with order and wisdom (Mosiah 4:14–27). The problem with wealth is not the money itself, but how easily having wealth distracts us from centering our hearts in Christ.

The distraction that money causes can happen so naturally and so easily that it is hardly noticeable. One reason for this is that we do have to live in this world and we do have to take care of our finances. But the Book of Mormon prophets show us that the fine line between being industriously self-supporting and setting our hearts on riches is treacherously easy to cross. It is far too easy to begin spending most of our time thinking about money and the things it can buy. Joseph Smith taught that our concern for riches, as much as anything, will keep us from being exalted. Focusing our attention on the things of this world keeps us from focusing on God and from learning the lessons of righteousness that we have to know in order to be exalted (D&C 121:34–36). This focus generally leads to compromises of integrity that good people would not otherwise make. These compromises can be as large as fraud, but can also show up in smaller ways, such as infringing on a friendship in order to make money.

To soothe the conscience of those who cross the line, or, as Nephi says, those who are “[lulled] into carnal security” (2 Nephi 28:21), the world offers a whole set of silly notions and rationalizations. It teaches that the mere making of money means we are serving God; that we cannot really serve God unless we have money; that being blessed with wealth is a sure sign of God’s love for us; and that since God requires us to work, working automatically makes us righteous. The world convinces us that we worked hard for what we have and, therefore, we have the right to spend our money the way we want to, rather than use it to build up the kingdom of God; it encourages us to believe the poor are somehow inferior, or unworthy, or unrighteous and deserve their poverty. With a handful of such ready-made rationalizations to support us, we sin with minimal guilt, oppressing the poor in a multitude of ways, as Moroni prophesied (Mormon 8:31–37). He says the general attitude of our day will be “Do this, or do that, and it mattereth not, for the Lord will uphold such at the last day”; he also says that such are in the bonds of iniquity (v 31). Moroni helps us understand that the danger in materialism is not so much a formal decision to be wicked as it is fuzzy thinking which leads us to unrighteous behavior.

The treachery of seeking wealth can be especially perilous for religious people because the outward respectability that comes from the combination of wealth and religious devotions can camouflage the need to constantly seek Christ. As John the Revelator points out,

this combination among the members in ancient Laodicea prevented them from realizing that they were spiritually “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev 3:17). They did not know they needed Christ because they were respectable people. Professor Hugh Nibley explains this phenomenon in historical terms:

As the Romans became ever more corrupted by wealth . . . they became more and more fascinated with the image of themselves as honest, hard-working, straight-forward, tough-minded citizens: *Hic est Ausonia* . . . [“Here is Ausonia”], they said: “The Western world of clean, fresh, simple, unspoiled pioneers.” This fiction became the very cornerstone of the official doctrine. “Rome was great because Rome was good, giving expression to the old Roman belief in the close association between piety and success.” This was the rhetoric of wealth, and it was inevitable—it always follows in such a situation, because people simply can’t live virtuously and viciously at the same time. Yet they want to be good and rich at the same time, and so they reach a compromise called respectability, which is nothing less than Babylon masquerading as Zion. (45–46)

As Nibley implies, respectability is not always possible to the followers of Christ (see Hel 3:33–35; John 15:19) and must not be used to determine whether or not we are right with God.

The antidote to the slow poison of materialism is the Book of Mormon. Its particular power on this issue stems from its ability to unmask the false notions that confuse us. It does not just label and condemn the seeking of riches and worldly things; it forces us to “unthink” faulty reasoning. The Book of Mormon disabuses us of false materialistic attitudes by attacking them head on and revealing what God really expects of us. As with the Zoramites, it shows us the dangers of a religious albeit materialistic people who, while thanking God for their blessings, look down upon and mistreat others because their clothing does not conform to the latest fashion or namebrand (Alma 31:12–24). In the book of Helaman, it shows that materialistic persecution happens within the Church (Hel 3:33–36); that even righteous people can be seduced into ridiculous beliefs concerning money (6:38–39); and that materialism can cause spiritual blindness even when warning signals are all around us, even when prophets chastise us (7:15–21). In the book of Mosiah, king Benjamin reminds us that we must find a way to help the needy even if their own poor decisions are responsible for their extreme circumstances (Mosiah 4:16–23). King Benjamin also teaches us that the amount we must



charitably give depends on how much we have—that God judges us on the intent of our hearts, not on the amount given (Mosiah 4:23–25). In the book of Jacob, the Book of Mormon informs us that helping others is the only reason for having wealth beyond our needs (Jacob 2:18–19). Most important of all, the resurrected Savior, Jesus Christ, teaches us that we must not spend all our time thinking about ourselves and how we can get ahead; rather we must keep our eyes single to God’s glory (3 Nephi 13:19–24).

On this last issue—keeping our eyes single to God’s glory—the Book of Mormon prophets are especially persistent. Throughout their records, they use an “either/or” rhetoric with metaphors, characterizations, and narrative to insist that we see the basic test of life as a choice between seeking God or seeking the world. Lehi and Nephi, for instance, portray our basic choice as either coming to and partaking of the tree of life—the love of God—or moving into the great and spacious building—the pride of the world (1 Nephi 8:10–33; 11:8–36). Elsewhere, Nephi says that there are “save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other the church of the devil” (1 Nephi 14:10). King Benjamin’s lifestyle is opposed to that of king Noah’s as a stark contrast between good and evil (Mosiah 2, 11), as is the Savior’s command to build our houses on the rock of his doctrine rather than the sand of the world’s philosophies (3 Nephi 14:24–27). In 4 Nephi, Mormon contrasts a Zion society in which there are no rich and no poor with the search for costly apparel and fine pearls that started the demise of righteousness among the Nephites (vv 3, 24). These few examples show that the Book of Mormon prophets confirm again and again the Savior’s injunction that we cannot serve both God and mammon.

The prophets’ persistent efforts to attack and unmask the dangers of materialism through narrative, argument, and rhetoric, could be ignored if not for the destruction at Cumorah. Mormon’s use of the extinction of the Nephites is a metaphor of the final judgment. It testifies that when God warns us with scriptures and prophets, he holds us accountable according to those teachings. He will not let us off the hook—wobble as we might. The Nephite destruction gives us pause to consider more fully President Benson’s concern that the Church is collectively under condemnation because “the Book of Mormon has not been, nor is it yet, the center of our personal study, family teaching, preaching, and missionary work” (“Cleansing” 5–6).

We must read the book if we are to follow God's commandment "not only to say, but to do according to that which is written" (D&C 84:57). Further, the Nephite destruction insists that we not take lightly the Book of Mormon's expectations. It insists that we read the book not merely as a history or as a book of God's favorite sayings, but that we carefully and fully consider its messages and apply them to our lives. We must exert our faith in deep study and pondering of the Book of Mormon, and not treat it trivially (see Alma 37:38–46). We must not be intimidated by Isaiah and the harder doctrinal chapters. In all this the Book of Mormon warns us not to reject its messages just because we do not like them.

What all of the warnings, teachings, rhetoric, and prophecies finally bring us to is that we must leave behind the foolishness of the world and seek to follow Christ with our whole souls. It is not the intention of the prophets of the Book of Mormon to tell us we are doomed or damned, but, rather, to awaken us to greater repentance. They long for us to learn how to come to Christ in a world that offers hundreds of counterfeit gospels. They show in their writings that hoping in Christ is a gift God reserved for those who know his will and follow his teachings, not a self-induced state of pseudo-happiness begotten illegitimately by seminars on self-awareness, self-esteem, success, and positive mental attitude (see Ether 12:4; Moroni 7:41–42; 8:26; *Lectures on Faith* 3:5, 65–66). Hoping in Christ is a hope of eternal life, engendered by repentance and the Atonement. It is not cheaply bought, but comes from living correct principles, and receiving confirmation through the Holy Ghost that we are in harmony with God. The Book of Mormon directs us to this hope. It is a tangible guide that shows us how to live righteously in a wicked world. It expects us to pursue perfection. It expects us to keep our covenants. Mormon's book requires us to take these expectations seriously by testifying that those who use the Book of Mormon to see through the lies of this world will, like Mormon, "be lifted up at the last day" (Mormon 2:19), while those who do not will face the judgment of spiritual destruction.

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