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The Book of Mormon—Lesson IV—Nephi, Son of Helaman

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Guide Lessons for January, 1931

LESSON I

Theology and Testimony

(First Week in January)

BOOK OF MORMON—LESSON IV—NEPHI, SON OF HELAMAN

This lesson covers the matter in the "Book of Helaman," from chapter 1 to chapter 12, inclusive. The time is the years between B. C. 52 and B. C. 6—forty-six years in all. In terms of the reign of the judges it would be the years lying between 40 and 86. It is a period filled with the most dramatic events, sharp contrasts, and the activities of one towering figure—Nephi, the son of Helaman. There is very little doctrine in the account, and that is more by way of comment on the part of Mormon, who abridges the larger history.

The Story

The story opens with a contest between three of Pahoran's sons for the chief judgeship — Pahoran, Paanchi, and Pacumeni. Pahoran is elected. Presently, however, he is murdered by a man named Kishkumen, one of a gang of outlaws. He is succeeded by his brother, Pacumeni.

Then there is trouble with the Lamanites. It happens that a certain Coriantumr has defected from the Nephites to the Lamanites. Down there in the south he awakens the sleeping enmities of those people for their northern neighbors. At the head of a very large force of Lamanites he conducts a quick march into the center of Nephite territory, taking the chief town, Zarahemla. This surprises Moroni-hah, who has strongly fortified the

border cities, under the impression that no enemy will attack the capital. Pacumeni, the chief judge, in an effort to escape from Coriantumr's force, is killed. In the end, however, the Nephites win; they characteristically allow their enemies to make a peaceful retreat. Coriantumr dies in one of the battles.

Helaman the Second becomes chief judge. And now there arises among the Nephites one of the factors that bring about their destruction—the Gadianton robbers. These thrive on the loose morals that grow up in this fickle nation. Also a large emigration to the north takes place at this time.

At the death of Helaman the Second, his son Nephi becomes chief judge. He is the outstanding character in the period. But he does not serve in this capacity for long, on account of the degeneration of the people; he "yields" his seat to Cezoram, a man of evil tendencies. Cezoram has been chosen by a majority of the same mind as himself. But his reign is short, for he is murdered by an unknown hand. His son succeeds him, but he has an even shorter reign, he too being murdered. The chief judgeship then gets into the hands of a man named Seezoram. But Seezoram, too, is killed by his own brother. Gadianton's spirit rules in the affairs of the Nephite nation, and government is run for the benefit of the rich and influential.

Meanwhile, Nephi, with his brother Lehi, throws himself with energy and earnestness into religious work. He visits the Nephite population first and then the Nephite cities still in the hands of the Lamanites. He meets with considerable success. By the Lamanites in their own territory, he is imprisoned; but after a miracle of the most unusual kind, he converts almost the entire nation.

From now on to the end of our present lesson we have a reversal in position of the Nephites and the Lamanites. The latter are the more righteous; the former, on the whole, go from bad to worse. Nephi is granted power by the Lord such as we read of in no other person—the power to command the elements, to bring on famine, and other prerogatives. But always he uses this power with great discretion. The center of his interest all the time is human welfare, not self-aggrandizement.

NOTES

1. *Secret Combinations*: As stated in the text of the lesson, one of the things that led to the ultimate overthrow of the Nephite nation was the Gadianton robbers, a band of "lawless resolute." Says Mormon, speaking when that overthrow was all but accomplished, "And behold, in the end of this book ye shall see that this Gadianton did prove the overthrow, yea, almost the entire destruction of the people of Nephi." He means the end of his record, the *Book of Mormon*.

The heart, the moving motive, of this secret organization was selfishness as against service. Of course, selfishness by the members of this order could best be promoted by getting power into their hands. Hence the chief political places were the object of their desires. And political offices once in their hands, they turned all the ma-

chinery of government to their own uses. Naturally, as power gravitated to the secret order, with its secret signs and covenants, its membership increased. For it appears to be a common human trait for us to want to be in favor with those who have power. And so it gradually came about that the majority of the Nephite people belonged, one way or another, to this secret combination. And as naturally, under this regime, robbery, murder, sex sins, oppression, were the order of the times. Never before in Nephite history was there such moral and political chaos. There was to be another such period, and on an even larger scale; but that was when the end of the nation was in sight. And Mormon attributes the situation to this secret organization. No wonder the Nephite Record declares secret combinations to be of the devil.

2. *The Eternal Circle*: No people in the history of the world, of whom we have any record, were more "swift to do evil" as the Nephites, or more unstable in their adherence to the principles of individual and national growth. All thoughtful readers of the *Book of Mormon* have observed this fact. The late George Reynolds, perhaps the greatest student of the Nephite Record we have had thus far, says this of the period we are now considering:

"Peace brought stability, stability brought wealth, wealth engendered pride, pride gave birth to numerous sins, to be followed by contentions, dissensions, and then wars. These evils begat sorrow, sorrow softened their heart to repentance, repentance was followed by the blessing of God, which again brought peace, prosperity, and, by-and-by, riches. And at this era of Nephite national life, this is the one eternal round which their inspired historians are compelled to chronicle.

"Within four short years of the happy time of universal peace we have just referred to, the riches of the world had induced stubbornness and rebellion towards God, combined with the insane desire to rob, plunder, and murder their fellowmen. If there ever were a people swift to do evil, they were the Nephites of that generation."

3. *Emigrations*: In this period, during the spell of peace that came after the war with the Lamanites, there was an emigration of both the Nephites and the Lamanites. They went into the "land northward," we are told. It is the second emigration of which the *Book of Mormon* speaks, the one in which the ship-builder Hagoth took a prominent part, being the first one. One of the reasons for this movement, no doubt, was the occupancy of some of the Nephite cities by the Lamanites.

"Now the land south," says Mormon, "was called Lehi, and the land north was called Mulek, which was after the son of Zedekiah; for the Lord did bring Mulek into the land north, and Lehi into the land south."

This was one of the rare periods in ancient America when, in the language of the historian, every man and woman could "go into whatsoever part of the land they would, whether among the Nephites or the Lamanites," with perfect security. Thus the people had "free intercourse with one another," buying and selling "to get gain;" they farmed and built and mined in peace. And thus they grew rich—and started off again on the same old segment of the "eternal round" of which Elder Reynolds speaks.

4. *Mormon's Comment*: Care must be exercised, in this lesson particularly, to distinguish between what Mormon says in his capacity

of abridger of the records before him and what he says in his capacity of prophet or philosopher. Once in a while he interjects a comment on what he is setting down as a historian. Such are the passages found in the third chapter of Helaman, verses 13 to 16, where he tells of the numerous records of the people who went into the "land northward," and the whole of the twelfth chapter of the same book, where he speaks of human frailty and unsteadiness in serving God. In chapter six also there is one of these interruptions of the narrative. See if you can pick it out.

Not that these are unimportant. They are important, as a matter of fact, from two points of view. First, they are valuable in themselves. They state clearly the leadings and tendencies among nations, and in the language of a man who is looking at them in the light of their results. In a sense they are finger-posts along the highway of life and are intended as such to those who may not know the way. And, secondly, they furnish us with a bit of evidence of the divine origin of the *Book of Mormon*; for they are consistent with the theory that the Nephite Record is an abridgment by the prophet Mormon, and not an original composition by Joseph Smith.

5. *The Prophet Nephi*: This man is one of the most extraordinary characters in human history.

He is unusual, first, in the almost unlimited power he is given by the Lord. "Behold, thou art Nephi," he is told, "and I am God. I declare unto thee in the presence of mine angels that ye shall have power over this people." This power enabled him to smite the earth with famine, pestilence, and destruction, according to the wickedness of the people; to seal and unloose in heav-

en and on the earth; to rend the temple in twain; to cast down mountains; to smite the people. It was a power such as, if we are correctly informed, has never been granted any other man.

And Nephi was unusual, secondly, in the use he made of this exceptional power. Always men love power. This seems to be a fundamental trait in human nature. But not always do they use this power to the best advantage—that is, for human welfare, the welfare of others. Nephi, however, employs it only when he can save men, never merely for his own advancement. This is a remarkable fact. Also he does not make a display of his power. When the wickedness of the people reaches a point where they are threatened with destruction at the hands of one another in internal strife, *he prays for the Lord to send a famine*. He knows that will end the war and bring the people to repentance—as indeed it does.

Questions and Problems

1. How do you account for the superior steadfastness of the La-

manites, once they are converted?

2. Explain why the use of his extraordinary power by Nephi is so noteworthy. Call to mind in history generally the ways in which large power has been used by men. When is power a good thing? When a bad thing? How is power acquired nowadays? How might it be used for greater good?

3. Why are “secret combinations” of the devil, as the *Book of Mormon* declares? Why were the Lamanites able to destroy the Gadian-ton robbers among them, and the Nephites not able to destroy them in their part of the nation?

4. Explain the influence that wealth has on the trend of things among the Nephites. Have we any parallel situations in our American communities today? Explain. What are we to do about it?

References

1. *Dictionary to the Book of Mormon*—Reynolds—under the names of the persons mentioned here.

2. *Message and Characters of the Book of Mormon*—Evans—chapters 25 and 26.

LESSON II

Work and Business

(Second Week in January)

INTELLECTUAL OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY THE RELIEF SOCIETY

“The aim of education is to give the individual all the perfection of which he is susceptible.” Immanuel Kant.

The Relief Society offers its members three courses of study—one in Theology, one in Literature, and one in Social Service—which are prepared by experts in their line and which may well be compared with extension courses offered by colleges and universities.

Every ward has a room where these courses are conducted by competent class leaders. Mind quickens mind. Congenial women meet weekly to discuss these lessons.

The class leaders and visiting teachers are studying, instructing, and growing intellectually through the service they are giving to the organization.

Teachers' topics are outlined for the use of the visiting teachers,