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# A NEPHITE'S COMMANDMENTS TO HIS THREE SONS.

BY B. H. ROBERTS.

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## I.—HELAMAN.

It was a custom with the old patriarchs in Israel, near the close of their lives, to call their children about them, prophesy what should befall them, or give them such charges, warnings and instructions as to them seemed necessary to their welfare. This Isaac did. Thus, too, did Jacob, and Moses, and doubtless many others of whom the Scriptures do not speak. The practice also obtained among the Nephites. Being of Israelitish descent, they would naturally perpetuate, in the land of promise to which they had been guided by the hand of God, a custom at once so beautiful and striking. Hence, Lehi, near life's close, and doubtless many others, called about them their sons, and instructed and blessed them.

It is with such a circumstance that we are to deal in this writing.

As a great character among the Nephites, stands the younger Alma, the son of Alma, the elder. It will perhaps be remembered that he was the first "judge," or president of the Nephite republic, and also the presiding high priest of the Church. He lived in the century just preceding the birth of Christ, dying—or at least disappearing from among the Nephites—in the year 73 B. C. In his youth and early manhood, he had been exceedingly wayward. His father's position as High Priest of the Church, and confidential friend of the last of the Nephite kings, King

Mosiah, of blessed memory, gave him social distinction among his people; and, being a man of brilliant attainments, with a turn for worldly pleasures, he became exceedingly wayward. Not satisfied with gratifying his own tastes for sensual pleasures, he joined with the younger sons of King Mosiah in an attack upon the Church and the religion it taught. He was a man of pleasing address and great eloquence, and persuaded men to accept his sophistries in place of the religion of Jesus Christ taught by the Church. We may only conjecture as to the details of his methods, but evidently he was not content with merely tearing down the Church of Christ; the usual merely negative attitude of the unbeliever was not enough for him. Perhaps his mind, from its very nature, was constructive; and hence, he could not be content with mere negation; and, therefore, he introduced an idolatrous system of worship. At any rate, we are told by the Nephite historian that "he became very wicked, and an idolatrous man \* \* \* and did speak much flattery to the people; therefore, he led many of the people to do after the manner of his iniquities." I assume this indicates that he concocted a rival system of religion and worship of the Church of Christ. And that he was successful in his bad enterprise is emphasized by the Nephite historian in this language: "He became a great hinderment to the prosperity of the Church of God; stealing away the hearts of the people: causing much dissension among the people; giving a chance for the enemy of God to exercise his power over them."

That all this was a cause of deep sorrow to his prophet father, the elder Alma, may go without saying. The soul of that righteous man was deeply grieved at the folly and wickedness of his gifted son. He saw great natural gifts of mind, and graces of person, perverted. He witnessed a splendid native eloquence supporting an idolatrous religion. He saw a naturally valient spirit supporting the devil's cause. He saw an intellect, by nature incisive and keenly logical, devoted to making the worse appear the better cause. One can think of nothing more distressing than this. 'Tis worse than sweet bells jingling out of tune. 'Tis virtue stooping to folly. It is as if the order of nature were reversed. 'Tis the sunshine creating cold and blackness. 'Tis the gentle rain of heaven falling on fruitful soil only to bring forth thistles, weeds

and briars. 'Tis the right hand of Truth—Intelligence—striking at the very face of Truth, and not striking for Truth; 'tis anything most pitiful and unnatural and deplorable. I say one can think of nothing more distressing than this. He cannot, unless it be the unseemly and unnatural conflict between father and son—the elder and the younger Alma. The reproach—howsoever unjust it may be, but nevertheless the reproach,—that comes from the inability of a servant of God at the head of the Church, to convert and control in the way of righteousness, his own son; this may be more pitiable than the perverted use of great natural endowments.

But the time came when the elder Alma's faith and prayers prevailed with God in behalf of this sinful son. An angel of God in his glory appeared to Alma, the sinful, and to his companions, the king's sons. Scoffing, there was none then. In stern tones the heavenly messenger represented Deity offended. He testified to the truth of the authority of God; and the earth seemed to tremble at his word. It was no gentle word that was spoken to the royal sinners, and the son of the high priest. The angel had descended in a cloud. The power of his presence felled them to the earth.

"Alma, arise and stand forth." "Why persecutest thou the Church of God?" "The Lord hath said, this is my Church, and I will establish it." "The Lord hath heard the prayers of his people, and also the prayers of his servant, Alma, who is thy father: for he has prayed with much faith concerning thee that thou mightest be brought to the knowledge of the truth; therefore, for this purpose have I come to convince thee of the power and authority of God, that the prayers of his servants might be answered according to their faith. And now behold, can ye dispute the power of God? For behold, doth not my voice shake the earth? and cannot ye also behold me before you? and I am sent of God."

There was no disputing such testimony as this. The idolater's sophistry was powerless here. A flight of eloquence, however brilliant, could not turn aside the force of the palpable evidence. Nor was there any gentle pleading on the part of the heavenly messenger to bring to pass the repentance of these down-smitten sinners. They had rejected the tearful pleadings of God's servants

—the high priest and the king; and for them there was naught now but the stern voice of authoritative rebuke and reproof. The message of God to Alma ended with these words: "If thou wilt of thyself be destroyed, seek no more to destroy the Church of God."

The effect of the message, so direct and powerful, was to bring Alma and his associates to a most humble repentance, and final acceptance with God. As is often the case with strong characters gone astray, but by some means brought to repentance, these men became most ardent workers for God. The sons of Mosiah rejected a crown in order to give themselves to the ministry; and so devout and faithful did Alma become that he succeeded his father to the office of high priest of the Church; and, as before remarked, he was chosen the first chief judge of the Nephite republic which came into existence at the death of King Mosiah.

And now, after an eventful career, in which there had been a plentiful mingling of joy and sorrow, successes and reverses, the high priest of God, knowing that the time of his departure was nigh, takes his sons Helaman, Shiblon and Corianton, and delivers to them his "commandments;" that is, his counsels—a father's advice and admonitions. In each case, he is dealing with a character of somewhat different temperament; and each with a somewhat different life's work before him from that of the others; and what that father said to his sons, will be counsel profitable to consider. And first as to Helaman.

In this young man, we have a character sedate, modest, temperate; unambitious but reliable, steady, patient; slow, perhaps, but courageous and of sound judgment; remarkable for soundness rather than for brilliancy; for wisdom, rather than for smartness; for intellect, rather than for eloquence; a man who is not "passion's slave;" one who is not a pipe on which fortune may play what stop she pleases; one who is apt to bear the buffets and rewards of fortune with equal patience; one who, though suffering all, would be as one who suffers nothing—a man one might wear in his heart of hearts and never feel distrust, nor suffer betrayal. Such characters make the world's reliable men; the world's wise counselors; humanity's true friends; the world's best workers, and God's best servants. And yet it is possible for such characters to

possess defects. They may lack something of energy. Broad-minded in their ideas, they are liable to lack intensity, both of thought and action, that characterizes narrow minds. They are given to overlooking details, and many seemingly small matters, but which really may be, and very often are, of great importance, are overlooked by them. Restless activity and ceaseless energy are not liable to characterize their movements. They are in danger of slothfulness, and their very liberality of thought is liable to lead them into the error of laxity, almost amounting to neglect in keeping the commandments of God.

All this should be kept in mind, in considering the counsel given by Alma to his son Helaman. It should be further remembered that Alma was aware of the defects, or rather of the qualities of temperament in his son, that are liable to degenerate into defects of character; and hence, very naturally, did what he could to fortify him against them. It should be further remembered that he had determined upon Helaman as his successor in the Presidency of The Church, and the custodian of the sacred records, circumstances which also gave color to his "commandments" to Helaman. And now as to the commandments:—

My son, give ear to my words; for I swear unto you, that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God, ye shall prosper in the land.

I would that ye do as I have done, in remembering the captivity of our fathers; for they were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it was the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and he surely did deliver them in their afflictions.

And now, O my son Helaman, behold, thou art in thy youth, and therefore, I beseech of thee that thou wilt hear my words, and learn of me; for I do know that whosoever shall put their trust in God, shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and afflictions, and shall be lifted up at the last day;

And I would not that ye think that I know of myself, not of the temporal, but of the spiritual; not of the carnal mind, but of God.

Then follows the story of his own wickedness, and his conversion by the appearance of an angel. In support of the great truth, that those who keep the commandments shall prosper in the land, and be delivered from their afflictions, and be lifted up at

the last day, he appeals to his own experience, to the history of Israel in their deliverance from Egypt, to the deliverance of his fathers from Jerusalem, and appeals to the knowledge of Helaman himself in support of his homely, yet important doctrine. Following is the passage:

And I have been supported under trials and troubles of every kind, yea, and in all manner of afflictions; yea, God has delivered me from prison, and from bonds, and from death; yea, and I do put my trust in him, and he will still deliver me; .

And I know that he will raise me up at the last day, to dwell with him in glory; yea, and I will praise him forever, for he has brought our fathers out of Egypt, and he has swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea; and he led them by his power into the promised land; yea, and he has delivered them out of bondage and captivity from time to time;

Yea, and he has also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem; and he has also, by his everlasting power, delivered them out of bondage and captivity, from time to time, even down to the present day; and I have always retained in remembrance their captivity; yea, and ye also ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done, their captivity.

But behold, my son, this is not all: for ye ought to know as I do know, that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land; and ye ought to know also, that inasmuch as ye will not keep the commandments of God, ye shall be cut off from his presence. Now this is according to his word.

This testimony is followed by a commandment to receive the sacred records:

And now my son Helaman, I command you that ye take the records which have been entrusted with me;

And I also command you that ye keep a record of this people, according as I have done, upon the plates of Nephi, and keep all these things sacred which I have kept, even as I have kept them; for it is for a wise purpose that they are kept;

And these plates of brass which contain these engravings, which have the records of the holy scriptures upon them, which have the genealogy of our forefathers, even from the beginning.

And behold, it has been prophesied by our fathers, that they should be kept and handed down from one generation to another, and be kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord, until they should go forth unto

every nation, kindred, tongue and people, that they shall know of the mysteries contained thereon.

And now behold, if they are kept they must retain their brightness; yea, and also shall all the plates which do contain that which is holy writ.

At this point, Alma seems to fear that Helaman will regard his faith that scripture records will retain their brightness, as the whim or superstition of an old man, overmuch trustful in the power of God; and from such an imputation, he thus defends himself:

Now ye may suppose that 'this is 'foolishness in me; but behold I say unto you, that by small and simple things, are great things brought to pass; and small means in many instances, doth confound the wise.

And the Lord God doth work by means to bring about his great and eternal purposes; and by very small means the Lord doth confound the wise, and bringeth about the salvation of many souls.

And now, it has hitherto been wisdom in God, that these things should be preserved; for behold, they have enlarged the memory of this people, yea, and convinced many of the error of their ways, and brought them to the knowledge of their God, unto the salvation of their souls.

Yea, I say unto you, were it not for these things that these records do contain, which are on these plates, Ammon and his brethren could not have convinced so many thousands of the Lamanites, of the incorrect traditions of their fathers; yea, these records and their words brought them unto repentance; that is, they brought them to the knowledge of the Lord their God, and to rejoice in Jesus Christ their redeemer.

This is surely a vindication of the employment of "small and simple things" for the accomplishment of great ones. And here, too, is an opportunity to call attention to the necessity for, and the value of, the written word of God, and its preservation from dimness, or from any other cause of obliteration or destruction. Much stress is frequently laid upon the necessity and importance of the "living word of God"—upon the "living oracles"—and deservedly so; for, indeed, such oracles are a necessity. But so, too, is the written word. It fixes permanently the general truths which God has revealed. It preserves, for all time and for all generations of men, the great frame-work of the plan of salvation—the Gospel. There are certain truths that are not affected by



ever-changing circumstances; truths which are always the same, no matter how often they may be revealed; truths which are elementary, permanent, fixed; from which there must not be, and cannot be, any departure without condemnation. The written word of God preserves the people of God from vain and foolish traditions, which, as they float down the stream of time, are subject to changes by distortion, by addition or subtraction, or by the fitful play of fancy in fantastic and unreliable minds. It forms a standard by which even the living oracles of God may instruct themselves, measure themselves, and correct themselves. It places within the reach of the people, the power to confirm the oral words, and the ministry of the living oracles, and thus to add faith to faith, and knowledge to knowledge. It is eminently proper that Alma should close his instruction to Helaman, on this head, in this language:

Therefore I command you, my son Helaman, that ye be diligent in fulfilling all my words, and that ye be diligent in keeping the commandments of God, as they are written.

The young future prophet of the Nephites is further assured that, if diligent in keeping the commandments of God, the sacred records, entrusted to his care, will be preserved in his hands, and "no power of earth or hell" should be permitted to take them from him. Other instructions were given relative to the sacred records to be entrusted to his keeping at some future time, but of these, we have not space to speak here. The final word of the father respecting the young man's ministry among the Nephites, cannot fail to be of interest:

Preach unto them repentance, and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ; teach them to humble themselves, and to be meek and lowly in heart; teach them to withstand every temptation of the devil, with their faith on the Lord Jesus Christ;

Teach them to never be weary of good works, but to be meek and lowly in heart: for such shall find rest to their souls.

Oh remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth: yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God;

Yea, and cry unto God for all thy support; yea, let all thy doings be unto the Lord, and whithersoever thou goest let it be in the Lord:

yea, let thy thoughts be directed unto the Lord; yea let the affections of thy heart be placed upon the Lord forever;

Counsel the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good; yea, when thou liest down at night, lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning, let thy heart be full of thanks unto God: and if ye do these things, ye shall be lifted up at the last day. \* \* \* Oh my son, do not let us be slothful because of the easiness of the way; for so was it with our fathers; for so was it prepared for them, that if they would look, they might live; even so it is with us. The way is prepared, and if we will look, we may live forever.

And now, my son, see that ye take care of these sacred things; yea, see that ye look to God and live. Go unto this people, and declare the word, and be sober. My son, farewell.\*

Such were the desires, the anxieties, the hopes, the testimonies and warnings, of a Nephite father, when contemplating the character of his son and his future labors and responsibilities.

In the course which Alma pursued, there is as much of instruction for fathers as there is for sons, in what he says to Helaman. A grand race of men were these Nephite prophets and leaders! Simple their lives, and plain their speech! Rich was their experience, and lavish were they in giving their sons the benefit of it; nor were they hypocrites in hiding that which might be considered unfavorable to themselves, but frankly owned their error, and warned their youth against the pit-falls into which their pride, folly or thoughtlessness, had led them.

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\*Book of Mormon, Alma, Chapters 36, 37.