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A Nephite's Commandments to His Three Sons - II. Shiblon

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Abstract: The opening story contained in the Book of Mormon depicts a prophet named Lehi taking his family into the wilderness to escape impending danger. Later in the Book of Mormon, prophets compare Lehi's journey to that of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. Mormon scholar S. Kent Brown draws from evidence in the Book of Mormon to argue that Lehi and his family may have been conscious that they were reenacting Israel's exodus and that they understood the pattern as well as prophets who commented on their journey hundreds of years after the fact. Other stories in the Book of Mormon also portray exodus patterns, and prophets often use the precedent of Israel's deliverance from Egypt to prove God's power. These prophets symbolically link the Exodus to Jesus Christ's forthcoming Atonement and teach that Christ's sacrifice will surpass all of God's work for his children.

A NEPHITE'S COMMANDMENTS TO HIS THREE SONS.

BY B. H. ROBERTS.

II.—SHIBLON.

No two men are alike. In all the millions of men who have inhabited the earth, no one of them has been a duplicate of another. Infinite variety exists among men as among blades of grass and the leaves of trees. Yet leaves of trees have much in common, so too have blades of grass; and so too have men. There seems to be an infinite sameness on the one hand, as there is an infinite variety on the other, and in that sameness infinite degree. It is true also that this infinity of variety extends to the inwardness of man as well as to his outwardness—to inward temperament and mind, as to outward form and semblance—a good thing to remember, since it may help us to be more patient with each other in seeking that unity of faith and feeling that bespeaks the harmony which comes from a comprehension of the truth, and which at the same time may make us one, and will also make us free.

No two men are alike, but perhaps so far as two men may be alike in temperament, Helaman and Shiblón, the sons of the younger Alma, were alike: Both were steady, plodding, modest, patient, righteous men. Neither of them could have enacted the part of the prodigal son. You could never think of either of them spending an inheritance in riotous living, and afterwards feeding on husks with swine. Theirs were the dispositions that would lead them to stay at home with the father, though one could never think

of them as complaining at a feast being given to the prodigal, when he returned from his wanderings and folly to his father's house. Blest, indeed are those "whose blood and judgment are so well commingled."

These men being much alike, it is not to be matter for wonder that the "commandments" of their father Alma were similar in each case; except, that as upon the elder son was to devolve the future responsibility of the presidency of the Church and charge of the sacred records, the instructions to him were more elaborate than to Shiblon. In his commandments to Shiblon, however, Alma began at the same point at which he commenced his instructions to Helaman: "My son, give ear to my words; * * * inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land; and inasmuch as ye will not keep the commandments of God, ye shall be cast off from his presence." And what better beginning can be made than this, in any kind of a case—either in admonishing a good man to persevere in well-doing, warning a wicked man of the future, or persuading a sinner to turn from the evil, and live in the pleasant pastures of righteousness? The remarks imply faith in God; and faith in God and in the results growing out of obedience or disobedience to him, must ever be the foundation of all righteousness, the starting point of all moral reforms, the proper beginning of all admonitions, and all preachments, hence, Alma, the servant of God, skillful in ministering the word, began with that statement of fundamental law.

And now more especially as to this young man Shiblon, what of him?

Such as he, are the joy of parents. From his youth had he served God; steady, faithful, earnest; no vanity, no folly had marred his career. He was doubtless such a son as every mother would wish her son to be; and that every father would point to as an example for his own son to follow. Such youths make the Samuels, Nathaniels, the Johns, the Nephis; and, coming to modern days, the Hyrums and Don Carlos Smiths, the Edward Partidges—Israelites, indeed, in whom is no guile! These be the righteous ones—whose prayers avail much; who move the powers of heaven to action for themselves and for their friends, because

the powers of heaven are controlled and handled upon the principles of righteousness, and only upon the principles of righteousness—and by righteous men. These are the salt of the earth, and render, in a quiet way, more service to mankind than the world takes note of—blessed be the righteous men—good men!

But do good men need commandments—do Shiblons require instructions—admonitions—warnings? Ah, yes; and never yet was man so righteous that he did not need warning. Sometimes they stand most in need of it. They are as those possessing rich treasures—they may lose them—their treasure may be stolen, hence the need of more care; for where much is possessed, much may be lost; and when a righteous man forsaketh his righteousness, how great indeed is the loss not only to him but to the world! And, moreover, and strange as it may seem, even goodness hath its vices, and they are, too, among the worst of vices. Self righteousness, begetting the air-sniffing “I-am-holier-than-thou” mein; and “I-thank-thee-that-I-am-not-as-this-publican” quality. This, and that which is akin to it, the spirit of narrowness, of intolerance, which so frequently attends on goodness, until sweet charity and broad human sympathies are shut out of its associations—these are the vices of goodness. These, and one other danger, stood in the way of Shiblons. That other was the danger which early piety stands in of lapsing ere the close of a life's work. Men of this type, not infrequently, weary in well-doing; and, after maintaining their righteousness through the morning hours of life, at last give way to temptation, and downward go

Like lawine loosen'd from the mountain's belt.

Shiblons had been steady and faithful through the early years of his life; he had been diligent and patient and long-suffering throughout the trying mission to the Zoramites; and though he was stoned and put in bonds for the word's sake, still he murmured not, but endured all patiently, for God was with him.

Yet stood he in the danger I have remarked—a lapse from his early righteousness, else why this admonition of the old Nephite prophet, his father, Alma?

For as you have commenced in your youth, to look to the Lord your

God, even so I hope that you will continue in keeping his commandments; for blessed is he that endureth to the end.

That he stood in danger of the pride which comes from a consciousness of personal goodness—in danger of the bigotry, intolerance and overbearing spirit that are so frequently the defects of consciously good people, let the further admonition of Alma witness:

See that ye are not lifted up unto pride; yea, see that ye do not boast in your own wisdom, nor of your much strength; use boldness, but not overbearance; and also see that ye bridle your passions, that ye may be filled with love; see that ye refrain from idleness. Do not pray as the Zoramites do, for ye have seen that they pray to be heard of men, and to be praised for their wisdom. Do not say, O God, I thank thee that we are better than our brethren; but rather say, O Lord, forgive me my unworthiness, and remember my brethren in mercy; yea acknowledge your own unworthiness before God at all times. * * * Now go, my son, and teach the word unto this people. Be sober.¹ My son, farewell.

I depend upon this passage bearing me out in what I have written concerning the dangers in which conscious goodness stands.

There is still more to be learned in the "commandments" of Alma to Shiblon. Something which discloses the strength of the righteous, the source of their power; a source, alas! too frequently overlooked by them, by all of us, in fact; by those of us who still hunger and thirst after righteousness, as well as those who have attained unto it. What I mean is disclosed in these words of Alma:

I know thou wast in bonds; yea, and I also knew that thou wast stoned for the word's sake; and that thou didst bear all things with patience, *because the Lord was with thee.* * * * And now my son, Shiblon, I would that ye should remember that inasmuch as ye shall put your trust in God even so much ye shall be delivered out of your trials, and your troubles, and your afflictions, and ye shall be lifted up at the last day.

And again, in Alma's own experience:

Now, my son, I would not that ye should think that I know these things of myself, but it is the Spirit of God which is in me, which maketh

these things known unto me; for it I had not been born of God, I should not have known these things. * * * And now, my son, I have told you this that ye may learn wisdom, that ye may learn of me that there is no other way or means whereby man can be saved, only in and through Christ. Behold he is the life and the light of the world. Behold, he is the word of truth and righteousness.

And here is the strength of the righteous—it is of God. It is of his grace and his mercy. It comes of being born of God. Man is not sufficient to the attainment of righteousness by his own unaided power. It is vain for philosophers to say to us, “’Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are gardens to which our wills are the gardeners; so that, if we will plant nettles, or sow lettuce; set hyssop and weed up thyme— * * * why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills.” The righteous man knows better. He has won his fight for the triumph of goodness in his own soul, by the grace of God, by the help of God, and *not* alone. True, there must be a conjunction of the will of man with the grace of God; there must be strivings for the right, and resistance of evil; there must be the hungering and thirsting after righteousness; an exercise of man’s free agency as to which he will choose, the good or the evil; but the agency used, and the choice being made—to attain to the heights of godly righteousness, there must be the help of God, the grace of God, the power of God. ¶

And this, as I read the words of Alma, is what the Nephite father would have his son recognize—the necessity for trust in God; the necessity of dependence on the grace of God. And this, I understand to be the spirit of the teaching of the Book of Mormon:—

I give unto men weaknesses that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that will humble themselves before me; for if they will humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them. Behold, I will show the Gentiles their weakness, and will show unto them that faith, hope and charity, bringeth unto me—the fountain of all righteousness.