What Can We Do? Reflections on 2 Nephi 25:23

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Abstract: In this paper, I offer a theological interpretation of 2 Nephi 25:23 that is distinct from any other in the relevant literature. My intention is to provide a three-pronged approach to interpreting the passage. In a first section, I highlight a number of ambiguities in Nephi's words that have not been sufficiently noted. Paying attention to these details helps to make clear that Nephi's saying is far more complex than it might at first appear, so further work must be done if Nephi's words are to be understood as he meant them to be. In a second section, I turn my attention to potential scriptural sources on which Nephi might have drawn in outlining his understanding of grace. Only one source is identified—the only absolutely sure source related to Nephi's words— and it proves to be immensely helpful in attempting to clarify Nephi's meaning. In a third section, I look at the context into which Nephi inserted the doctrine of grace. The setting in which Nephi decided to say something about grace helps both to clarify his meaning and to suggest a way in which the doctrine of divine grace applies to concrete situations. In the end, I hope to show that Nephi's words, read carefully, highlight and enrich— rather than simply fail to contradict — the Book of Mormon's clear emphasis on grace

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Half a century has now passed since Latter-day Saint scholars began to give systematic attention to what the Book of Mormon has to say about the role played by grace in salvation. Although the earliest efforts in this direction were, according to one early (and unappreciative) observer, limited to "Mormon academic circles,"[1] subsequent developments have drastically expanded the impact of such study. Thanks especially to the immensely popular writings of Stephen E. Robinson and Robert L. Millet beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and more recently to the similarly popular writings of Brad Wilcox, English-speaking Latter-day Saints have generally become better aware of the unmistakable fact that salvation by grace is among the principal teachings of the Book of Mormon.[2] As all of these authors emphasize, however, at least one Book of Mormon text seems to warn against giving too much prominence to grace: Nephi's famous statement that grace saves us only "after all we can do" (2 Nephi 25:23). This one passage—more than any other—has been used to justify a certain understanding of the Atonement, that grace is the reward for righteous works rather than the enabling gift that makes all works possible in the first place. As Robinson, Millet, and Wilcox all state, it is necessary to

determine the meaning of this passage to clarify what the Book of Mormon teaches about the Atonement.

In this paper, I build on the work of these and other scholars.[3] I do so, however, by offering a theological interpretation of 2 Nephi 25:23 that is distinct from any other in the relevant literature. My intention is to provide a three-pronged approach to interpreting the passage. In a first section, I highlight a number of ambiguities in Nephi's words that have not been sufficiently noted. Paying attention to these details helps to make clear that Nephi's saying is far more complex than it might at first appear, so further work must be done if Nephi's words are to be understood as he meant them to be. In a second section, I turn my attention to potential scriptural sources on which Nephi might have drawn in outlining his understanding of grace. Only one source is identified—the only absolutely sure source related to Nephi's words—and it proves to be immensely helpful in attempting to clarify Nephi's meaning. In a third section, I look at the context into which Nephi inserted the doctrine of grace. The setting in which Nephi decided to say something about grace helps both to clarify his meaning and to suggest a way in which the doctrine of divine grace applies to concrete situations. In the end, I hope to show that Nephi's words, read carefully, highlight and enrich—rather than simply fail to contradict—the Book of Mormon's clear emphasis on grace.

A word about methodology is likely necessary, since I offer in what follows a theological reading of scripture.[4] Contrary to certain popular associations with the word *theology*, to interpret scripture theologically is neither to systematize doctrines nor to square prophetic passages with academically fashionable secular perspectives. Rather, it is simply a matter of asking how scripture might inform theological reflection, that is, how it might shape responsible thinking about questions pertaining to the life of religious commitment. Consequently, in what follows, I undertake neither a strictly historical investigation (where the aim would be to determine what Nephi's words meant in their original historical context) nor a strictly doctrinal study (where the aim would be to determine how Nephi's words coalesce with official or authoritative teachings). I draw on what I take to be the best of such work, but my aim is principally to ask how Nephi's words might help to shape charitable reflection on the struggles of the average Latter-day Saint to be right with God.[5] Questions of charity have unmistakably motivated the reinterpretations offered by Robinson, Millet, and Wilcox. I hope they motivate my own, more emphatically theological investigation of 2 Nephi 25:23 as well.

Ambiguities in 2 Nephi 25:23

Nephi's words are as familiar as any in the Book of Mormon: "For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Nephi 25:23). But just as familiar as the words themselves, unfortunately, is a certain problematic interpretation of this passage. In his well-known book *Believing Christ*, Stephen Robinson identifies the problem: "At first glance at this scripture, we might think that grace is offered to us only chronologically *after* we have completed doing all we can do, but this is demonstrably false."[6] It is demonstrably false that grace is given only *after* we have done all that lies in our power because—as Robinson goes on to explain—everything we do is through the life that God in loving grace has already extended to us. As King Benjamin reminded his people, God "has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that you may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another" (Mosiah 2:21). It is in this sense that, as Bruce C. Hafen has put it, "the Savior's gift of grace to us is not necessarily limited in time to 'after' all we can do. We may receive his grace before, during, and after the time when we expend our own efforts."[7]

It is, then, false that grace comes to us only after and in response to our first doing all we could possibly do to obtain salvation. But it is also entirely unclear that Nephi's words are meant to suggest anything like what readers tend to see in his words at first glance. The supposedly obvious reading is, in other words, not obvious.[8] This is because, Nephi's penchant for plainness notwithstanding, 2 Nephi 25:23 is a difficult text, and one that deserves close reading. To understand just how unclear Nephi's words are, a few interpretive questions, none of which has any obvious answer, might be asked:

1. How important to the interpretation of 2 Nephi 25:23 is the use of the word *we*? The word appears four times in the passage, and the first two instances of the word have a limited rather than a general meaning. When Nephi says that "we write" and "for we know," he seems straightforwardly to be using the word *we* to refer to those who write scripture for the benefit of later Nephites ("our children") and Lamanites ("our brethren"). Does the referent of *we* change in the last bit of the passage, when Nephi says that "we are saved" and refers to "all we can do"? If so, why? And if not, how does the meaning of the text change?

2. In the first part of 2 Nephi 25:23, Nephi claims that his aim is to persuade his readers "to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God." How are these two things—believing in Christ and being reconciled to God—different, and how significant is the difference between them? Is it important that the first is active (one *believes* in Christ), but the second is passive (one is *reconciled* to God)? Is it important that the first is connected only to the Son (one believes in *Christ*), but the second seems to be connected to the Father (one is reconciled to *God*)? Most importantly, which of these—or is it both of them—does Nephi understand as being linked to salvation by grace?
3. Whatever Nephi ultimately means to suggest when he qualifies salvation by grace (that is, by adding "after all we can do"), it has to be recognized that he ties salvation exclusively to grace. Indeed, even if one interprets him as affirming the claim that grace comes only after and in response to human efforts, it has to be confessed that the only source for salvation he identifies is grace (grace does the actual saving, even if it is mobilized by human efforts). However it should be qualified, Nephi's statement that "it is by grace that we are saved" could not on its own terms be much clearer. How should this incontrovertible fact shape interpretation of Nephi's words?
4. Is it at all clear what Nephi means by the word *after*? Stephen Robinson has suggested that the word in this passage serves as "a preposition of separation," with the result that Nephi's message, paraphrased, amounts to the following: "We are still saved by grace, after all is said and done."[9] And there are other meanings of *after* with which to experiment. Noah Webster's original *American Dictionary of the English Language*—published in 1828 and therefore a helpful source for understanding the meaning of English words at the time Joseph Smith dictated Nephi's writings to his scribe—reminds us that *after* sometimes means "in imitation of" or "according to the direction and influence of" (as in "to walk *after* the flesh").[10] How might alternative (but plausible) interpretations of the word *after* change the way we interpret the passage?
5. Had Nephi meant to say that grace comes to us only chronologically after and in direct response to our best efforts, should he have said not "it is by grace we are saved, after all we can do" but "it is by grace we are saved, after we have done all we can do"? Strictly speaking, the

> claim that grace saves "after all we can do" does not say or imply anything whatsoever about human efforts actually being made—or even attempted, for that matter. Is there something heavy-handed about assuming that Nephi meant to say "after we have done all we can do" when his words read otherwise? If so, how should a reference to what *can be* done, without any actual mention of what *has been* done, be understood?

As these questions evince, what has for far too long passed as the obvious reading of 2 Nephi 25:23 is anything but obvious. The pronoun Nephi uses is ambiguous; he draws distinctions we as readers tend to ignore; he qualifies salvation by grace only after affirming it straightforwardly; he formulates his qualification with a preposition whose meaning is uncertain; and he mentions only what can be done—not what has been done. Moreover, I suspect that further close scrutiny of the text would allow other complicated (and complicating) questions to be raised. But if there is no straightforward or obvious meaning of Nephi's words concerning grace, how is the text to be interpreted? Are there no answers at all to any of the questions raised here? I think there are answers, but they are not to be secured through an appeal to the supposedly obvious meaning of the text. Rather, they are to be learned through an investigation of Nephi's scriptural sources.

Sources for 2 Nephi 25:23

It might seem a bit bold to suggest that Nephi drew his understanding of salvation by grace from an identifiable human source. At worst, such a suggestion might be regarded as a secular gesture, a refusal to consider the possibility that Nephi came to know the nature of salvation directly from God, or at least through the Spirit. These are real and justifiable worries, and yet it seems undeniable—as I believe will become clear—that Nephi more borrowed than revealed his doctrine of salvation by grace. The source for his understanding seems rather straightforwardly to have been his brother Jacob.

Close reading of Nephi's writings suggests that he was right to borrow his understanding of salvation from Jacob. While Nephi says very little about Christ's Atonement—primarily, it seems, because he was much more interested in the history of Israel, which was the focus of his most important prophetic vision (recorded in 1 Nephi 11–14)—Jacob is presented in Nephi's record as the primary audience of Lehi's remarkable sermon on the Atonement in 2 Nephi 2, and the sole preacher of the other great sermon on

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Jacob and Nephi wrote and taught things that would help people believe in Jesus Christ.

the Atonement in Nephi's writings, 2 Nephi 9. Moreover, it was Jacob who, after Nephi's death, would ask of his readers the rhetorical question, "Why not speak of the atonement of Christ, and attain to a perfect knowledge of him?" (Jacob 4:12). While Jacob cut his teeth on Atonement theology and continued to reflect on it to the end of his prophetic career, Nephi gave his time first and foremost to understanding the Abrahamic covenant, the chief subject of the writings of Isaiah.[11] In light of these details, it makes perfect sense that Nephi's few words on grace are deeply rooted in—indeed, more or less borrowed from—his brother's teachings.[12]

Making of his brother Jacob one of the three "sentinels at the gate of the [Book of Mormon]" positioned to "admit us into the scriptural presence of the Lord," Nephi includes in 2 Nephi a lengthy two-day-long sermon that Jacob delivered to the Nephites.[13] At its heart, of course, is one of the Book of Mormon's most remarkable sermons on salvation, mentioned just above (2 Nephi 9). At the conclusion of Jacob's words on the second day of the sermon, however, the following passage appears: "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh; and remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved" (2 Nephi 10:24). It is, I think, unmistakably from these words that Nephi draws (or at least to these words

that Nephi alludes) in his own teaching concerning salvation by grace some fifteen chapters later. Indeed, not only are there clear parallels in language that link the two passages, but there is also a structural indication that the two passages are connected. Each of the two passages is immediately followed by a discussion of what it means to interpret scripture spiritually, and Nephi places the one discussion (2 Nephi 10:23–11:8) immediately before and the other (2 Nephi 25:1–30) immediately after the scriptural text he hopes his readers will regard through a spiritual lens (the so-called Isaiah chapters of 2 Nephi 12–24). Jacob's and Nephi's respective statements about grace, are together, along with the discussions in which they find their immediate context, thus clearly meant to frame Nephi's lengthy quotation of Isaiah.[14]

However, the close relation between the words of the two passages is essential in the structural details. At least three major elements are common to the two texts. First, just as Nephi states that one of his purposes is to persuade his readers "to be reconciled to God," Jacob pleads with his hearers to "reconcile yourselves to the will of God." Second, just as Nephi straightforwardly states that "it is by grace that we are saved," Jacob claims that "it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved." Finally, just as Nephi concludes his teaching concerning grace with a prepositional phrase beginning with the word *after* ("after all we can do"), Jacob qualifies his claim by a prepositional phrase beginning with the word *after* ("after ye are reconciled unto God"). These three parallels suggest a tight connection between the two passages. It seems best to assume that Nephi drew his understanding of the role played by grace in salvation directly from the teachings of his brother—teachings he carefully decided to include in his record.

Placing Jacob's and Nephi's words side by side helps in a number of ways to clarify the meaning of Nephi's teaching. First, it seems that Nephi's claim that "it is by grace that we are saved" should be read in light of Jacob's still-plainer statement: "it is *only* in and through the grace of God that ye are saved." Jacob leaves no room for the idea that something of our own efforts plays a role in saving us, even if Nephi's more ambiguous formulation seems to do so.[15] Second, the parallel between Nephi's and Jacob's prepositional phrases, each beginning with the word *after* ("after all we can do" and "after ye are reconciled unto God"), suggests the likelihood that "*all* we can do," as in Nephi's formulation, is "be reconciled to God." This, moreover, accords nicely with the use of the phrase "all we can do" elsewhere in the Book of Mormon.[16] More importantly, these first two points of clarification help to provide answers to two of the questions

raised in the preceding section of this paper. In light of Jacob's unmistakable insistence that salvation comes *only* in and through divine grace, the question of how much weight should be granted to Nephi's having attached salvation only to grace is answered. Further, the clarification that "all we can do" is "be reconciled to God" helps to clarify what it is from the first half of 2 Nephi 25:23 that Nephi means to link directly to salvation. A third point of clarification—the most difficult but also the most instructive—provides answers to the other three questions raised in the preceding section.

A third point of clarification, then, is that the structure of Jacob's words in 2 Nephi 10:24 makes clear that the qualifying prepositional phrase (beginning with the word *after*) is meant there to specify the time when the injunction to remember becomes relevant, rather than the time when grace becomes operative. In other words, by having "after ye are reconciled unto God" interrupt the injunction to "remember . . . that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved," Jacob suggests that what comes after reconciliation with God is not the divine granting of grace but the human remembering of grace—the recognition on the part of the reconciled that salvation was, is, and will always be God's work. This application of the prepositional phrase beginning with *after* might be productively transferred to Nephi's teaching. In other words, it seems that the phrase "after all we can do" is meant to specify the time when "we know that . . . we are saved," rather than the time when "we are saved." Nephi's words, in fact, could be rearranged to mirror the structure of Jacob's, making them slightly clearer: "for we know, after all we can do, that it is by grace that we are saved."

This third point of clarification makes it unnecessary to speculate about unconventional meanings of the word *after*, theologically fascinating though the implications of such experiments might be. The word *after* seems, in the end, just to mean "chronologically after," though it specifies the time when something is to be remembered or recognized ("we know") rather than the time when something is to be effected or brought to pass ("we are saved"). At the same time, this third point makes clear why Nephi refers to what can be done without making mention of anything actually having been done. Regardless of what actually has been done, grace is what saves—and that remains true even after all that can be done. Even if the most remote theoretical possibilities are realized, it is still grace that saves.[17] Finally, this third point of clarification seems to answer the question concerning Nephi's ambiguous use of the word *we*. While in the usual interpretation of 2 Nephi 25:23, it is assumed that the

referent of the word changes (from *we* the writers of scripture to *we* human beings), the parallel with Jacob's teaching makes clear that the referent of the word remains constant through the whole passage. Nephi intends to teach his readers what he has come to realize, after all he can do: that it is by grace—and grace alone—that he is saved.[18]

Jacob's words in 2 Nephi 10:24 are the (extremely) likely source for Nephi's words concerning grace in 2 Nephi 25:23, and the connection between the two passages clarifies the meaning of Nephi's teaching in a remarkable way. Far from claiming that grace comes only after and in response to our own best efforts (which, again, is demonstrably false), Nephi says that grace is what characterizes the whole divine work of salvation, and that what comes after—or at least should come after—salvation is a full recognition of the unique role played in salvation by grace. All that Nephi and Jacob ask their readers and hearers to do is to be reconciled to God, and reconciliation is what happens only when we stop holding out against God's purposes, when we "yield" and therefore cease, at last, to be "an enemy to God," as the angel put it to King Benjamin (Mosiah 3:19). To speculate a bit, perhaps Nephi and Jacob jointly modeled their teachings on Exodus 31:13, where the Lord announces that it is only when human beings stop working for themselves (by giving themselves to Sabbath observance) that they "may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you."[19]

Applications of 2 Nephi 25:23

The basic sense of Nephi's words concerning the role played by grace in salvation has been clarified. It remains to be asked what Nephi understood to be the relevance of the doctrine. Why is it in 2 Nephi 25 that he makes this most famous of his statements regarding the Atonement, since those statements are few and far between? If Nephi assumes a generalizable understanding of grace, what is to be learned from the context into which he inserts that understanding? In order to feel the real force of Nephi's (borrowed) conception of grace, and not just to understand its intelligible meaning, it is necessary to consider the context of 2 Nephi 25:23.

Unfortunately, little work has been done on the context of Nephi's words concerning grace. Those who have contributed substantially through their writings to the development of a Latter-day Saint awareness of grace, have generally focused on broad themes as they are reflected in isolated passages.[20] And commentaries on the Book of Mormon tend to say relatively little about the nuances of textual context.[21] This is unfortunate because Nephi's

statement about salvation by grace is integral with the text that surrounds it. In 2 Nephi 25, read as a coherent whole, one can find a kind of guide for understanding the implications and relevance of the doctrine of salvation by grace. To comprehend that larger context, however, requires some work, since it cannot be understood without careful attention to Nephi's general purposes in producing his small plates record.

At a very broad level, it should be noted that 2 Nephi 25:23 appears in the stretch of Nephi's record—from 2 Nephi 6 to 2 Nephi 30—to which Nephi himself gave the title of "the more sacred things" (1 Nephi 19:5), the part of his record he was directly commanded to produce for his children. That privileged stretch of text is almost exclusively focused on the writings of Isaiah, not only due to the presence, at its heart, of thirteen chapters drawn more or less without alteration from the brass plates (2 Nephi 12–24), but due also to the focus both Jacob and Nephi have on Isaiah in their respective contributions to the text (2 Nephi 6–10 and 2 Nephi 25–30).[22] But as interesting and deserving of attention as most of 2 Nephi 6–30 is, it is obviously what Nephi does in his narrower contribution (2 Nephi 25–30) that is most immediately relevant here.

The first chapter of Nephi's contribution, within which his statement regarding grace is to be found, is clearly meant to set up the chapters that follow. The chapter naturally divides into three parts: (1) 2 Nephi 25:1–8 contains a kind of apology for the inclusion, without clarifying commentary, of so many chapters of Isaiah's writings; (2) 2 Nephi 25:9–19 shifts the focus from Isaiah's prophecies to what Nephi calls "[his] own prophecy" (2 Nephi 25:7), a plainer vision of things that is intended to clarify what in Isaiah's texts is most important; and (3) 2 Nephi 25:20–30 contains an aside about Nephi's general purposes in creating his record. Nephi's reference to grace (in 2 Nephi 25:23) falls within the third of these three parts of the chapter, but it can only be understood in light of the two that precede it.

For present purposes, little needs to be said about Nephi's apology for including Isaiah among "the more sacred things" (part 1 of 2 Nephi 25). What is essential is that he believed that his own prophecy could be used to clarify Isaiah's writings (part 2). The chapters immediately following 2 Nephi 25 are given to a remarkable weaving of Isaiah's writings (in particular, Isaiah 29) into Nephi's own prophetic understanding (in particular, his vision recorded in 1 Nephi 11–14).[23] What Nephi thus presents in the first two parts of 2 Nephi 25 is an introduction to—and a foretaste of—what he will go on to do

more generally in his contribution to the text, namely, to interlace the various elements of his own apocalyptic vision with the written text of Isaiah's brass plates prophecies.

Why is all this important to the interpretation of the aside Nephi offers in the third part of 2 Nephi 25, within which his words regarding grace appear? It is because it was the apocalyptic vision of 1 Nephi 11–14, summarized in part 2 of 2 Nephi 25, that originally provided Nephi with his reasons for producing his record—the very reasons he reviews in part 3 of 2 Nephi 25. That apocalyptic vision, unmistakably the most important of Nephi's prophetic experiences, focused on a single, crucial event: the sudden emergence in the last days of a book that would solve the world's religious problems, unmistakably the Book of Mormon. The angelic guide who accompanies Nephi during the vision describes the book in the following words: "For behold, saith the Lamb, I will manifest myself unto thy seed, that they shall write many things which I shall minister unto them, which shall be plain and precious. . . . And the words of the Lamb shall be made known in the records of thy seed, as well as in the records of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (1 Nephi 13:35, 41).

From these words (and nothing more was told to Nephi by way of description of the book), and from the earlier part of his vision in which he saw the visit of the resurrected Christ to his father's descendants, Nephi would most naturally have concluded that the book he had seen coming forth to supplement the Bible in the last days would be, not his own writings, but the writings of his children living during and after the visit of the Christ. And indeed, as many textual details suggest, Nephi seems to have seen his major purpose in writing his record less to contribute to the book that would make known "the words of the Lamb" than to inspire the production of that book by his children.[24]

It is this that Nephi explains in 2 Nephi 25:23 and the verses surrounding it. The prophecy Nephi inserts into part 2 of 2 Nephi 25 culminates in a prediction of the coming forth of the book, but he clearly differentiates between *that book* and *his own record* as he explains, in part 3, his purposes in writing. Thus, Nephi describes the prophesied book from his vision as something that will eventually aid in "convincing [the Jews] of the true Messiah, who was rejected by them" (2 Nephi 25:18), while he describes his own record as addressed principally to his children, his brethren, his people, and, more generally, the seed of Joseph (2 Nephi 25:20–21, 23, 26–28).[25] And Nephi provides a set of purposes for directing his own writings to Lehi's children. He

writes his record with the intent: (1) "to persuade [them] to believe in Christ" (2 Nephi 25:23); (2) to help them to "know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins" (2 Nephi 25:26); (3) to be sure that they "know the deadness of the law" so that they will not "harden their hearts against [Christ] when the law ought to be done away" (2 Nephi 25:27); (4) to inform them that "the right way is to believe in Christ and deny him not" (2 Nephi 25:28); (5) to encourage them to "keep the performances and ordinances of God until the law shall be fulfilled" (2 Nephi 25:30); and, most importantly, (6) to instruct them to take as "the law" whatever "words" Christ would "speak" to them after he had "risen from the dead" (2 Nephi 26:1). From these and other texts, it is clear that Nephi's intention with his record was first and foremost to prepare his people for Christ's visit to the New World, thereby preparing them to assume the task they would have of producing a book reporting the words of the visiting Christ. Nephi saw it as his life's work to ensure, by writing for his direct descendants, that the book he saw in vision would eventually be written.

Significantly, in the middle of his explanation, Nephi refers to salvation by grace. His worry, clearly, was that his descendants who, six centuries later, would be present at the visit of Christ to the New World would be tempted to resist the announcement of the fulfillment of the law of Moses. Having come himself to see, after all he could do, that grace is what lies behind salvation, Nephi wanted his children to learn the same lesson. He wanted them to see, once the law had been fulfilled, that it was nothing they did or could have done that delivered them from sin and death, because it was in fact Christ who delivered them from sin and death. Nephi wanted his children—he wrote with the explicit hope to persuade them on this point—to believe in Christ and to be reconciled to God. His worry was that they might resist God, and specifically that they might do so in the name of the law of Moses. If they did that, they would certainly fail to write the book Nephi had seen in vision.

Nephi took the doctrine of grace to be most relevant when he recognized the real temptation human beings feel to resist the revelatory. This may come as a bit of a surprise. We are naturally inclined to feel that grace is what needs to be understood when we experience the burnout that can result from working intensely to fulfill the never-ending demands that come with activity in the Church.[26] For Nephi, though, the sole efficacy of grace is what needs remembering when we are inclined to think that programs and practices, norms, and traditions—even when these have their origins in inspiration—matter

more than what God wishes to teach us now. Grace is what we are ignoring whenever we resist God's gentle (or not-so-gentle) entreaties. We manifest our ignorance of the role played in salvation by grace whenever we feel guilty about waiting on the Lord, whenever we feel we ought just to get to work because we know what we are supposed to do and now just need to get it done. Grace is what we need to come to understand anew when we see that we simply do not have the patience to be still, and know that God is God. If we can be still—not only in body but also in spirit—we might know, as Nephi did, that God is God, and that it is God who saves by grace.

This is a lesson that Nephi himself had to learn with great difficulty. He retrieved a copy of the law of Moses for his people only after he finally ceased resisting God's Spirit—which he did twice: first by trying to do things his own way (simply asking Laban for the plates, and then attempting a trade), and then by refusing the constraint of the Spirit (to kill Laban with his own sword).[27] We should not be surprised that Nephi could not bear the thought that his children might eventually take the very law he had thus secured for them as a reason in turn to resist God's word to them. Nothing worried Nephi more than those who say, "We have received the word of God, and we need no more of the word of God, for we have enough!" (see 2 Nephi 28:29). Nephi testified clearly to the nature of his God: "For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little . . . unto him that receiveth I will give more" (2 Nephi 28:30). Thus, to realize fully that what saves is grace—God's good will, expressed in the form of covenantal bonds—is to realize that whatever our excuse might be for holding out against God, it is a poor one.

Conclusion

This, then, is the concrete meaning of salvation or deliverance by grace, as I think Nephi understands it: to be given to see that God still speaks, and to be given to receive what he says in full faith. All we can do is resist the temptation to hold out against the Spirit's enticements and constraints. After that, it only remains for us to remember the source of our strength to resist, which was never ours to begin with. RE

Notes

1. Sterling McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1965), 67.

2. See Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992); Robert L. Millet, *Grace Works* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003); and Brad Wilcox, *The Continuous Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009).

3. Other important works along lines similar to those drawn by Robinson, Millet, and Wilcox are Bruce C. Hafen, *The Broken Heart: Applying the Atonement to Life's Experiences* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989); and Donald P. Mangum and Brenton G. Yorgason, *Amazing Grace: The Tender Mercies of the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996). Also worthy of mention, though written in a different vein, are Hugh Nibley, "Work We Must, but the Lunch Is Free," in *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don Norton (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 202–51; C. Terry Warner, *Bonds That Make Us Free: Healing Our Relationships, Coming to Ourselves* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 2001); Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism and the Love of God* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2006); and Adam Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012).

4. For a good but brief introduction to theological interpretation of scripture, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 19–23. Many helpful short articles on theological interpretation can be found in the same volume.

5. See Adam S. Miller, "Introduction" in *An Experiment on the Word: Reading Alma 32*, ed. Adam S. Miller (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2011), 1–8.

6. Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 91; emphasis added.

7. Hafen, *The Broken Heart*, 155–56.

8. One might object at this point that the vulgar interpretation Robinson singles out is too easy to criticize, that it would be more responsible to focus on more sophisticated readings of 2 Nephi 25:23. Is it "demonstrably false," for instance, that Nephi has reference specifically to one sort of grace (the sort associated with salvation), where other prophets might have reference to another sort of grace (the sort associated with creation)? Presumably not. For my own purposes, though, such a rightly-concerned objection strengthens rather than weakens my point—namely, that an interpretation of Nephi's words must be undertaken more carefully, since the passage is more difficult than it might seem at first glance.

9. Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 91–92. Other interpreters have followed suit. See Mangum and Yorgason, *Amazing Grace*, 60–61; Millet, *Grace Works*, 131; and Wilcox, *The Continuous Atonement*, 104.

10. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, facsimile ed. (Baltimore: United Book, 2009), s.v. "after."

11. While Nephi says relatively little about Atonement theology and focuses almost exclusively on covenant theology, Jacob seems to have been deeply interested in both themes. Jacob gives his attention to Isaiah and the covenant in major parts of his sermon in 2 Nephi 6–10 (likely providing Nephi with his motivations for including it along with Isaiah and his own prophecies in 2 Nephi 6–30), and he returns to the theme in a most striking way in Jacob 4–6.

12. Of course, it does not necessarily follow from the fact that Nephi *said* relatively little about atonement that he *knew* relatively little. It is entirely possible that Nephi came to understand the nature of the Atonement independently of Jacob but from the same source—whether divine (through the Spirit, presumably) or human (from his father, Lehi). I suspect otherwise, but there is more than one speculative story that could be told to account for the textual details.

13. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 36.

14. See Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012), 53.

15. One might suggest that Jacob's talk of "reconciling oneself to God" indicates what must be done to be saved, but it is difficult to square too strong an interpretation along such lines with Jacob's insistence that "it is *only* in and through the grace of God" that salvation is granted. Jacob does not deny that something must be done, but he denies that anything apart from God's grace actually accomplishes the work of salvation.

16. Robert Millet connects 2 Nephi 25:23 to Alma 24:10–12, where the king over the newly-converted Anti-Nephi-Lehies says that "it has been all that we could do . . . to repent of all our sins," as well as that "it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God." See Millet, *Grace Works*, 131–32.

17. Brad Wilcox makes some similar points in Wilcox, *The Continuous Atonement*, 109–11.

18. This last point, concerning the referent of "we," is one I return to in the third section of this paper.

19. Much more needs to be said to justify fully what I have offered here as a passing interpretation of "reconciliation" (that is, as a gesture of *stopping*). Here I mean only to indicate a direction for further theological reflection.

20. The exception is Mangum and Yorgason, *Amazing Grace*, 58–59. While these two scholars at least suggest the importance of the passage's textual context, they say very little about it.

21. Brant Gardner does provide interesting historical context, but he says little about the textual context of 2 Nephi 25:23. See Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 2:343–48. In light of the textual context of 2 Nephi 25:23, I think some of Gardner's conclusions are overly hasty.

22. The structure of Nephi's record has been analyzed in Frederick W. Axelgard, "1 and 2 Nephi: An Inspiring Whole," *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (Fall 1986): 53–66; and, in much greater detail, in Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 33–68.

23. See Heather Hardy and Grant Hardy, "How Nephi Shapes His Readers' Perceptions of Isaiah," in *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah: Reading 2 Nephi 26–27*, ed. Joseph M. Spencer and Jenny Webb (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2011), 37–62.

24. Nephi seems to have begun to glimpse the possibility of a wider audience for his writings relatively early in his project (see 1 Nephi 19:18–21), but he seems only eventually to have come to the conviction that they would actually be a part of the book he saw in vision (see 2 Nephi 33:13). On this point, see Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 79.

25. Second Nephi 25:22 makes clear again that Nephi recognized the possibility that his writings might have readers other than and in addition to his intended audience.

26. This is the scholarly conclusion of the anthropologist who studies contemporary Mormon culture as well. See Douglas J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2000).

27. Of course, the text never directly asserts that the first two attempts to retrieve the brass plates from Laban were at odds with divine purposes. I take it, however, that this is at least implied by the fact that the Spirit is mentioned for the first time when Nephi enters Jerusalem for the third attempt.