



Type: Magazine Article

Song of Nephi

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Source: *The Instructor*, Vol. 102, No. 10 (October 1967), pp. 409-411

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Abstract: 2 Nephi 4:16-35 shares much of the character and attitude of Nephi. The Song of Nephi begins with a feeling of despair and ends with an inspiring prayer of commitment to a better way of life. It is a pattern to follow on the road to repentance.

SONG OF NEPHI

by H. Richard Thomas*

Had we no other information about Nephi than the few verses known as the "Song of Nephi" we would have sufficient evidence to convince us of his greatness. That he was a person of unusual capacity is suggested by the willingness of a group of people to follow him into the wilderness when some of his brethren sought to take his life. His construction of a temple and his ability to organize his followers to care for themselves both spiritually and temporally tell us that he was a person of considerable capacity. (See 2 Nephi 5.)

Most important as an indication of Nephi's greatness is the evidence that he deeply loved his people and was loved by them. Nephi says, "I pray continually for them by day, and mine eyes water my pillow by night." (2 Nephi 33:3.) His love was returned, for not only were many intelligent people willing to follow him but they used his name for the area in which they settled, asked him to be their king, and called themselves Nephites. (See 2 Nephi 33.)

Were we to analyze the reasons for the impressive affinity between Nephi and his people we would have to include references to the following: (1) They had endured many things together in the struggle to get to the promised land. (2) Nephi had served them selflessly with no requirement or expectation of remuneration. (3) He had been a teacher and prophet of great faith, receiving many important revelations in their behalf. (4) He was a real person whom they knew intimately. While we may respect and admire those whom we know superficially, we can really love only those with whom we have a close association of giving and sharing.

(For Course 9, lesson of December 10, "A Latter-day Saint Is Prayerful"; for Course 17, lesson of December 3, "Nephi, a Statesman"; for Course 25, lesson of December 31, "Look for the Beam"; for Course 27, lesson of October 29, "Mortal Probation"; for Course 29, lessons of December 10, 17, and 31, "Faith" and "Repentance"; to support family home evening lesson 15; and of general interest.)

A SONG OF REPENTANCE

In connection with this last reason, the "Song of Nephi" takes on new meaning. It is one of the most impressive pieces of literature in all scripture. It is not only an accurate commentary on life and repentance, it gives us some special insight into Nephi's character.

It would be well to read the whole psalm aloud while analyzing its sections and making comments as seem appropriate.

Verses 16-19 describe Nephi's attitude of humility and despair because of his weaknesses and sins. This is certainly the reaction of a righteous man. It is the wicked person who tends to find excuses for his sins or to seek false comfort in such rationalizations as, "Everyone else is doing it."

Next Nephi recounts to himself the many blessings he has enjoyed even though he is not a perfect man (verses 20-25). This is true for all of us. God is not interested in condemnation. He is concerned that we meet the challenges of life and grow from the experience. He blesses and helps even the most sinful, if they will honestly seek Him.

In verses 26-30 Nephi reevaluates his attitude of remorse in the light of God's goodness to him and reorients it in a more positive vein. Verses 31-33 contain a beautiful prayer in which Nephi supplicates the Lord for strength to improve: "Wilt thou make me that I may shake at the appearance of sin?" The psalm concludes with an inspiring prayer of commitment in which Nephi dedicates himself to being a better person.

(Continued on following page.)

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PROPHETS ARE REAL PEOPLE

This marvelous piece of scripture describes the process each of us goes through as we repent and strive to improve our lives. It is one of the best authenticators of the Book of Mormon. Moreover, it has significant value for us in our study of the Book of Mormon in communicating the fact that Nephi was a real person who struggled with the issues of life much the same as we do. Throughout history men have shown a tendency to put prophets in a class apart from all other men. They are unnaturally elevated in a way which makes their work more difficult. The Prophet Joseph Smith tells us how this phenomenon adversely affected men's acceptance of him.

... I was this morning introduced to a man from the east. After hearing my name, he remarked that I was nothing but a man, indicating by this expression, that he had supposed that a person to whom the Lord should see fit to reveal His will, must be something more than a man. He seemed to have forgotten the saying that fell from the lips of St. James, that Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, yet he had such power with God, that He, in answer to his prayers, shut the heavens that they gave no rain for the space of three years and six months; and again, in answer to his prayer, the heavens gave forth rain, and the earth gave forth fruit. Indeed, such is the darkness and ignorance of this generation, that they look upon it as incredible that a man should have any intercourse with his Maker.¹

The same difficulty attends our general authorities today. As members of the Church we have a tendency to communicate to one another an inaccurate idea of these leaders. Speaking to the topic, "Are the General Authorities Human?" Elder Bruce R. McConkie has said:

"Such is the view in the world generally; people think: If there is such a thing as a prophet, he is so ennobled and exalted that he is different from the general run of men. They may think of John the Baptist out in the desert eating locusts and wild honey, or of someone like Enoch, of whom the people said, 'A wild man has come among us.'

"And there is somewhat this same concept in the Church. We think of the dignity and glory and greatness of the office. Then some of that feeling

spills over and is applied to the individual who holds the office.

"There might be a way to get this subject in a better perspective. Instead of saying, 'Are the general authorities human?' let me say to you, 'Is your bishop human?' What would the answer be? Or if I would say to you, 'Are the missionaries human?' would the answer be yes or no? It depends entirely on what we are talking about. Certainly they are human in the sense that every foible and frailty and difficulty common to the human race attends all of them and all of us. But on the other hand, the general authorities and the bishops and the missionaries—and this extends out and includes every member of the Church—ought not to be human in the sense of worldliness or of carnal pursuits. . . ."²

"WOULD . . . ALL . . . WERE PROPHETS"

It would be just as inaccurate and inappropriate to suggest that Nephi was not repenting for what were to him real sins as it would be to imply that his sins were grave, for he was a real person and was therefore subject to "every foible and frailty and difficulty common to the human race." When we, as teachers, present not only Nephi but prophets in general as quite perfect and confirm the misconception in the minds of children, we are unjustly conditioning the young to an unhappy and frustrating experience when they come to understand that these good men are human.

The psalm of Nephi presents a unique opportunity to teach repentance, faith, hope, and love, and also confidence in a warm and personal Father in heaven. It is wonderful to know that God does not require perfect men to do his work as prophets. It is equally wonderful to know that all men share the same destiny in the eyes of God. Moses said it well:

Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them! (Numbers 11:29.)

We cannot all serve as President of the Church or as general authorities, but we can become as worthy and capable as they if we, like Nephi, truly feel sorrow for our sins, recognize God's goodness to us, repent, and resolve to do better.

¹Bruce R. McConkie, "Are the General Authorities Human?" a talk given at the University of Utah Institute of Religion, October 28, 1966.
Library File Reference: PROPHETS AND PROPHECY.

²*Documentary History of the Church*, Volume II; page 302.

SONG OF NEPHI

Behold, my soul delighteth in the things of the Lord; and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the great goodness of the Lord, in showing me his great and marvelous works, my heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.

I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.

And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted.

My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep.

He hath filled me with his love, even unto the consuming of my flesh.

He hath confounded mine enemies, unto the causing of them to quake before me.

Behold, he hath heard my cry by day, and he hath given me knowledge by visions in the nighttime.

And by day have I waxed bold in mighty prayer before him; yea, my voice have I sent up on high; and angels came down and ministered unto me.

And upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceeding high mountains. And mine eyes have beheld great things, yea, even too great for man; therefore I was bidden that I should not write them.

O then, if I have seen so great things, if the Lord in his condescension unto the children of men hath visited men in so much mercy, why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken, because of mine afflictions?

And why should I yield to sin, because of my flesh? Yea, why should I give way

to temptations, that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul? Why am I angry because of mine enemy?

Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin. Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul.

Do not anger again because of mine enemies. Do not slacken my strength because of mine afflictions.

Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say: O Lord, I will praise thee forever; yea, my soul will rejoice in thee, my God, and the rock of my salvation.

O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul? Wilt thou deliver me out of the hands of mine enemies? Wilt thou make me that I may shake at the appearance of sin?

May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite! O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me, that I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road!

O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness! O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine enemies! Wilt thou make my path straight before me! Wilt thou not place a stumbling block in my way—but that thou wouldest clear my way before me, and hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine enemy.

O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm.

Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh. Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss; therefore I will lift up my voice unto thee; yea, I will cry unto thee, my God, the rock of my righteousness. Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up unto thee, my rock and mine everlasting God. Amen.

—2 Nephi 4:16-35.