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## Spiritual Rebirth: Have Ye Been Born of God?

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Source: *The Book of Mormon and the Message of The Four Gospels*

Editor(s): Ray L. Huntington and Terry B. Ball

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 2001

Page(s): 201-217

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## *Spiritual Rebirth: Have Ye Been Born of God?*

# 13

Brent L. Top

*Christ and his apostles taught the concept of spiritual rebirth in the New Testament, but the Book of Mormon portrays it more vividly and teaches that the gate to spiritual rebirth is baptism. Not all conversions, however, are as sudden as those of King Benjamin's people, Alma the Younger, and King Lamoni and his wife. Spiritual rebirth is a continuous process, the fruits of which are a peaceful conscience, joy, desire to do good continually, and an increase of love and spiritual understanding.*

When Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, approached the Savior by night to learn of this remarkable Rabbi, Jesus admonished him, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Blind to the spiritual significance of Jesus' teaching, Nicodemus expressed his confusion concerning Jesus' reference to rebirth. "How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" (John 3:4). The Master responded, not with an extensive doctrinal explanation, but by reiterating the charge he had previously given, with a minor amplification. "Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (John 3:5-8).

The New Testament provides brief glimpses of what is meant by the injunction, “Ye must be born again.” These glimpses are like small pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle. John the Baptist taught his disciples that he baptized with “water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire” (Matt. 3:11). At the Last Supper, Jesus promised the apostles that he would pray unto the Father that the Father might bestow upon them “another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever” (John 14:16). The apostle Paul also taught of a spiritual birth whereby a person becomes a “new creature” in Christ and walks thereafter in a “newness of life” (2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 6:4). Each of these passages is an important piece of the puzzle and indirectly refers to the spiritual rebirth of which Jesus spoke as he commanded Nicodemus, “ye must be born again.” Yet they do not fully explain what the baptism of fire really is and how it is obtained (John 3:7). It is only through the doctrines of the Restoration and through the Book of Mormon that more pieces of the puzzle are revealed and fitted together. Only through the Restoration can we see the true picture of the doctrine of spiritual rebirth. Through a careful examination of the doctrinal teachings of the Book of Mormon prophets, we can more fully understand what it means to be born again, how one comes to experience spiritual rebirth, what the fruits or indicators of that transformation are, and how one retains a remission of sins.

### Baptism – Gateway to Spiritual Rebirth

Just as the Savior explained to Nicodemus that being “born of the Spirit” is linked to being “born of the water,” the Book of Mormon teaches that baptism is the “gate” which opens the pathway to spiritual rebirth, and, if faithfully followed, it ultimately leads to eternal life. “For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water,” Nephi declared, “and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (2 Ne. 31:17). The Prophet Joseph Smith also taught this relationship between baptism and spiritual rebirth when he declared: “Being born again, comes by the Spirit of God through ordinances.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the scriptures one can see how ordinances are physical events that symbolize spiritual processes. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the ordinance of baptism. The apostle Paul wrote to the Roman Saints: “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3–4). Not only does the ordinance open the gate to spiritual birth, but it also symbolizes the death of the sinful nature and the birth of a “new creature” – cleansed by the sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and sincere repentance (2 Cor. 5:17). President Joseph Fielding Smith further explained the important link between baptism and being born again: “Every child that comes into this world is carried in water, is born of water, and of blood, and of the spirit. So when we are born into the kingdom of God, we must be born the same way. By baptism, we are born of water. Through the shedding of the blood of Christ, we are cleansed and sanctified; and we are justified, through the Spirit of God, for baptism is not complete without the baptism of the Holy Ghost. You see the parallel between birth into the world and birth into the kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup>

### Being Born Again

Spiritual rebirth—also described in the scriptures by such terms as baptism of fire or a mighty change—is the spiritual transformation that results when one has actually received the Holy Ghost and experienced the remission of sins that accompanies it. Nephi explained that after one has followed the Savior “with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent, repenting of [his] sins, witnessing unto the Father that [he is] willing to take upon [him] the name of Christ, by baptism,” only then will that person “receive the Holy Ghost; yea, then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost; and then can [he] speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel” (2 Ne. 31:13). Two of the most illustrative examples in the Book of Mormon of how the process described by Nephi actually works are the accounts of the conver-

sion of King Benjamin's people and the dramatic transformation of Alma the Younger.

King Benjamin taught his people that there was "no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men" except through the Atonement of Jesus Christ (Mosiah 3:17). He further explained that the natural man, who is "an enemy to God," could only be overcome by submitting to Christ's redemptive power, continually repenting and forsaking sins, calling on the Lord daily, and continually obeying him (Mosiah 3:19). Benjamin's people were already members of the Church. They had already received the ordinance of baptism and perhaps had previously received the baptism of fire. However, as Benjamin taught them anew concerning the principles of the gospel and how to "retain a remission of [their] sins" (Mosiah 4:12), a remarkable thing occurred: "And now, it came to pass that when King Benjamin had thus spoken to his people, he sent among them, desiring to know of his people if they believed the words which he had spoken unto them. And they all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:1-2).

King Benjamin's doctrinal explanation to his people regarding what had indeed occurred within their hearts also serves as one of the best definitions of being born again: "And now, these are the words which King Benjamin desired of them; and therefore he said unto them: Ye have spoken the words that I desired; and the covenant which ye have made is a righteous covenant. And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters" (Mosiah 5:6-7).

Experiencing a similar yet even more dramatic conversion, Alma the Younger described his spiritual transformation: he was changed by the power of the Holy Ghost from an enemy of God to a "new creature," converted and committed to the cause of righteousness. "For, said he, I have repented of my sins, and have

been redeemed of the Lord; behold I am born of the Spirit. And the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; and thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God" (Mosiah 27:24-26).

The Book of Mormon clearly teaches that while the ordinance of baptism allows one to enter in at the gate—"for the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water"—salvation cannot be obtained without also experiencing the spiritual rebirth—"then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost" (2 Ne. 31:17). "Water baptism is only a preparatory cleansing of the believing penitent," explained Elder Orson Pratt, "whereas, the Baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost cleanses more thoroughly, by renewing the inner man, and by purifying the affections, desires, and thoughts which have long been habituated in the impure ways of sin."<sup>3</sup> There are several passages in the Book of Mormon that illustrate, as well as define, this spiritual rebirth (see Enos 1:1-6; Alma 13:1-12; 18:41-43; 19:6, 33; Hel. 5:41-49; 3 Ne. 9:20-22). The spiritual rebirth that Jesus told Nicodemus was required in order "to see the kingdom of heaven" is the same baptism of fire that we experience when we fulfill the commandment given at confirmation: receive the Holy Ghost (John 3:3). Being born again is the actual reception of the Holy Ghost, which brings a remission of our sins and a newness of life—being raised from a lower or carnal state to a state of righteousness and increased spiritual enlightenment. "The baptism of the Holy Ghost is the baptism of fire," Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote. "Sins are remitted not in the waters of baptism, as we say in speaking figuratively, but when we receive the Holy Ghost. It is the Holy Spirit of God that erases carnality and brings us into a state of righteousness. We become clean when we actually receive the fellowship and companionship of the Holy Ghost. It is then that sin and dross and evil are burned out of our souls as though by fire."<sup>4</sup>

Some of the scriptural accounts of men and women whose lives were transformed by the baptism of fire and whose sins were remitted involve dramatic or almost sensational events. Alma (see

Mosiah 27; Alma 36), Paul (see Acts 9), King Benjamin's people (see Mosiah 5), King Lamoni and his wife (see Alma 18–19), and the general gathering of the Saints on the day of Pentacost (see Acts 2) are among the many who were born again in a most remarkable manner—in a singular and overwhelming event. These miraculous conversion stories often leave readers wondering if they must be born again in the same manner. The Book of Mormon also provides us with accounts that describe this same spiritual transformation as a less visible, more gradual process rather than a single event. The resurrected Christ declared: "And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost, even as the Lamanties, because of their faith in me at the time of their conversion, were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and they knew it not" (3 Ne. 9:20). Even in our day, there are those who receive the Holy Ghost and become new creatures in Christ through sudden, miraculous conversions, and yet others likewise are baptized by fire and become "quickenened in the inner man" (see Moses 6:65–66) and still, like the Lamanites, may not even recognize it. "A person may get converted in a moment, miraculously," Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught. "But that is not the way it happens with most people. With most people, conversion [spiritual rebirth and the accompanying remission of sins] is a process; and it goes step by step, degree by degree, level by level, from a lower state to a higher, from grace to grace, until the time that the individual is wholly turned to the cause of righteousness. Now this means that an individual overcomes one sin today and another sin tomorrow. He perfects his life in one field now, and in another field later on. And the conversion process goes on until it is completed, until we become, literally, as the Book of Mormon says, saints of God instead of natural men."<sup>5</sup>

"We say that a man has to be born again, meaning that he has to die as pertaining to unrighteous things in the world. Paul said, 'Crucify the old man of sin and come forth in a newness of life' (Rom. 6:6). We are born again when we die as pertaining to unrighteousness and when we live as pertaining to the things of the Spirit. But that doesn't happen in an instant, suddenly. That also is a process. Being born again is a gradual thing, except in a few isolated instances that are so miraculous they get written up in the scriptures. As far as the generality of the members of the

Church are concerned, we are born again by degrees, and we are born again to added light and added knowledge and added desires for righteousness as we keep the commandments.”<sup>6</sup> Thus there is no real difference in the quality of the conversion or spiritual rebirth – whether it comes gradually over time or suddenly in a singular event. The process may differ, but the results are the same. It could perhaps be compared to “the difference between suddenly emerging from a dark room as into a bright sunlight as opposed to experiencing the dawning of day. The dawning is more gradual but results in just as much light.”<sup>7</sup>

### The Fruits of Spiritual Rebirth

Whether it be a sudden and singular transformation or a slow process of growth with almost imperceptible changes, becoming born again – becoming Christ’s sons and daughters with a baptism of fire – brings with it fruits that can be felt and discerned within the heart and life of one who has overcome the natural man through the Atonement of Christ. Just as spiritual rebirth can be a process as well as an event, so can this spiritual transformation occur on various levels and at different times in one’s life. The Book of Mormon, perhaps better than any other volume of scripture, teaches and illustrates not only how we can tell if we have been born of God but also to what extent. The following fruits or indicators of spiritual rebirth, taught in the Book of Mormon, are not given to be an exhaustive inventory of experiences we must have in order to be considered born again; rather, they may serve as inspiring examples and illustrative guides. The Book of Mormon can bring us comfort by helping us recognize how the Atonement has indeed transformed us. It can also inspire us to “press forward with a steadfastness in Christ” that we may be born again and again – from one level to a higher one until finally we hear the blessed pronouncement, “behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Ne. 31:20).

#### *Peace of Conscience*

One of the most significant indicators or by-products of spiritual rebirth is found in Enos’ declaration: “My guilt was swept away” (Enos 1:6). Approximately four centuries after Enos’



wrestle with God that resulted in a baptism of fire, King Benjamin's people experienced similar feelings after their prayer of faith and penitence: "O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified" (Mosiah 4:2). The Book of Mormon records their miraculous spiritual rebirth, which effected a remission of their sins and was accompanied by a "peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ" (Mosiah 4:3). Like Enos, King Benjamin's people experienced a sweet spiritual fruit of conversion that swept away feelings of guilt and pain and replaced them with a peace of conscience that permeated their very souls. Spiritual rebirth does not eliminate our memory of our sins but instead affects us in much the same manner as Alma, who explained to his son: "I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more" (Alma 36:19). Although he continued to remember his sins and even the pain he suffered as a result of them, after his spiritual rebirth he was no longer tortured by guilt. Each of us, like Alma, may continue to remember our sins, and, to a degree, the feelings of remorse and pain associated with them, even after we have been born of God. Through faith and repentance, however, the harrowing or debilitating effects of a guilty conscience are removed, and with a baptism of fire will come a peace of conscience that will cause us to feel as Alma testified: "My soul was racked with eternal torment; but I am snatched, and my soul is pained no more" (Mosiah 27:29).

### *A Feeling of Joy and Divine Love*

Another indicator of the mighty change of heart often cited in the Book of Mormon conversion accounts is overwhelming joy and envelopment in the divine love of God. Alma contrasted this divine feeling with the pains of his wickedness when he declared: "And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain! Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy" (Alma 36:20-21).

Another example of the joy that accompanies spiritual rebirth is found in the scriptural account of the conversion of King Lamoni and his wife. After being taught the gospel by Ammon, they were “overpowered by the Spirit” and they fell to the ground “as though they were dead” (Alma 19:13, 18). Witnessing this remarkable scene, Abish, the converted Lamanite woman, took the queen by the hand, who arose and testified of her remarkable spiritual transformation: “O blessed Jesus, who has saved me from an awful hell! . . . And when she had said this, she clasped her hands, being filled with joy” (Alma 19:29–30). King Benjamin’s people experienced something akin to this: “Behold they had fallen to the earth, for fear of the Lord had come upon them,” the scriptural account records. After they petitioned the Lord for forgiveness of their sins “the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy” (Mosiah 4:1, 3).

Although we may not become so overwhelmed by the baptism of the Holy Ghost that we fall to the earth in a spiritual trance, we can, nonetheless, feel the exquisite joy that comes with a remission of sins and conversion. Associated with this increased sense of joy is also an intensified awareness of divine love. Alma characterized this fruit of being born again as a joyful desire to “sing the song of redeeming love” (Alma 5:26). This in turn heightens our love, appreciation, respect, reverence, and awe for God. This intense love for God and from God causes those who have experienced the mighty change to echo Nephi’s declaration: “He hath filled me with his love, even unto the consuming of my flesh” (2 Ne. 4:21).

Moroni taught that “despair cometh because of iniquity” (Moro. 10:22). Darkness, despondency, and discouragement are destroyed by the joy that blesses those who are born of God. Hearts burdened with hopelessness are lifted and illuminated by a hope instilled by the companionship of the Comforter. “The remission of sins bringeth meekness, and lowliness of heart,” declared Mormon, “and because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter filleth with hope and perfect love” (Moro. 8:26).

### *No Desire to Do Evil, but to Do Good Continually*

Another testament of spiritual transformation is a mighty change in dispositions and desires. King Benjamin's people experienced this fruit and joyfully declared: "The Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent . . . has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). King Lamoni, his wife, and all those who on that occasion had been converted following Ammon's ministrations likewise testified of the mighty change that took place in their lives when they were spiritually reborn and forgiven of their sins. "They did all declare unto the people the self-same thing – that their hearts had been changed; that they had no more desire to do evil" (Alma 19:33). Similarly, Alma spoke of the high priests whose "garments were washed white through the blood of the Lamb" and whose hearts and lives were changed by the sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost so that they "could not look upon sin save it were with abhorrence" (Alma 13:11–12).

Thus we can determine the degree to which we have been born again by examining our disposition toward evil and our desires to do good continually. This condition does not mean that we never again succumb to any of the temptations surrounding us, but it does mean that sinfulness becomes repugnant to us, and the desires of our hearts are turned to righteousness and doing good. This fruit of spiritual rebirth is reflected in the following experience of President Joseph F. Smith:

The feeling that came upon me was that of pure peace, of love and of light. I felt in my soul that if I had sinned – and surely I was not without sin – that it had been forgiven me; that I was indeed cleansed from sin; my heart was touched, and I felt that I would not injure the smallest insect beneath my feet. *I felt as if I wanted to do good everywhere to everybody and to everything. I felt a newness of life, a newness of desire to that which was right. There was not one particle of desire for evil left in my soul. . . . Oh! that I could have kept that same spirit, that same earnest desire in my heart every moment of my life from that day to this. Yet many of us who have received that witness, that new birth, that change of heart, while we may have erred in judgment or have made many mistakes, and often perhaps come short of the true standard in our lives, we have repented of the evil, and we have sought from time to time forgiveness at the hand of the Lord; so that until this day the same desire and purpose*

which pervaded our souls when we . . . received a remission of our sins, still holds possession of our hearts, and is still the ruling sentiment and passion of our souls.<sup>8</sup>

### *Increased Love for Our Fellowman*

The spiritual transformation that comes with the reception of the Holy Ghost also creates a “new heart” and a “new spirit” – a heart softened by the mercy of Christ, a heart that is filled with greater love and compassion toward others (Ezek. 36:26). Enos exemplified this when, after the Lord assured him that his sins were forgiven, his compassion and concern extended beyond himself to his brethren, the Nephites, and even to his enemies, the Lamanites (see Enos 1:9–13). After the remarkable conversion of the sons of Mosiah, “they were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble” (Mosiah 28:3). The love of God and the joy of the Lord that fills our hearts when we are born again naturally becomes reflected in our desire to “bring [others] to taste of the exceeding joy of which [we] did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost” (Alma 36:24). King Benjamin perhaps explained it best as he counseled his people regarding the mighty change they had experienced: “If ye have known of [God’s] goodness and have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins, which causeth such exceedingly great joy in your souls, . . . ye will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peacably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due. . . . And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need” (Mosiah 4:11, 13, 16).

### *Increased Spiritual Understanding*

Several Book of Mormon accounts of baptism by fire and the accompanying spiritual transformation speak of souls being filled with light. A natural or sinful man is spiritually darkened, whereas one who has overcome the natural man and has become a new creature in Christ is enlightened by the Holy Ghost. Such

spiritual enlightenment is evident in the conversion of King Lamoni – “the dark veil of unbelief was being cast away from his mind, and the light which did light up his mind, which was the light of the glory of God, which was a marvelous light of his goodness – yea, this light had infused such joy into his soul, the cloud of darkness having been dispelled, and that the light of everlasting life was lit up in his soul” (Alma 19:6). This increased guidance of the Holy Spirit not only brings comfort, peace, and joy but also an increased spiritual perspective on life. President Wilford Woodruff testified of the increased spiritual discernment that comes with the reception and companionship of the Holy Ghost. “The veil of darkness, of doubt, and fear is taken from our minds,” he explained, “and we can see clearly where to go and what to do; and we feel that our spirit is right – that we are acceptable before the Lord our God, and are the subjects of his blessings.”<sup>9</sup>

King Benjamin’s people witnessed that “the manifestations of his Spirit” and “great views of that which is to come” accompanied their baptism of fire (Mosiah 5:3). These “great views of that which is to come” not only instruct the spiritually reborn concerning the doctrines of the kingdom and the “mysteries of God” but also give them strength in times of uncertainty and trial and provide practical insight into the daily challenges of life (Alma 26:22). One who is quickened by this spiritual outpouring is drawn to spiritual things more than the natural man. This baptism of the Spirit has “enlightened our minds, enlarged our understandings, extended our feelings, informed our judgment,” President John Taylor taught. “[It] has warmed up our affections to God and holiness; has nourished and cherished us, and put us in possession of principles that we know will abide for ever and for ever.”<sup>10</sup> Men and women who are born of the Spirit – who are changed and renewed through the Atonement of Christ – “come to see and feel and understand things that the spiritually inert can never know. They become participants in the realm of divine experience.”<sup>11</sup>

### *Having the Image of God Engraven upon Our Countenances*

Speaking to the Church in Zarahemla, Alma asked a simple yet significant question of the Saints regarding their level of

spiritual rebirth and conversion. “Have ye received [God’s] image in your countenances?” (Alma 5:14). Perhaps Alma was referring to a literal and discernible change that comes upon a person who is spiritually reborn and whose life is redirected to righteousness—a real, spiritual appearance that bespeaks a new life of goodness and purity. However, rather than referring to an outward, visible aura, Alma may have been speaking more of an inward, spiritual transformation that manifests itself in the actions of the recipient of that mighty change. As one LDS scholar of the scriptures explained: “An ‘image’ is not just an outward visual impression but also a vivid representation, a graphic display, or a total likeness of something. It is a person or thing very much like another, a copy or counterpart. Likewise, *countenance* does not simply mean a facial expression or visual appearance. The word comes from an Old French term originally denoting ‘behavior,’ ‘demeanor,’ or ‘conduct.’ In earlier times the word *countenance* was used with these meanings in mind. Therefore, to receive Christ’s image in one’s countenance means to acquire the Savior’s likeness in behavior, to be a copy or reflection of the Master’s life. This is not possible without a mighty change in one’s pattern of living. It requires, too, a change in feelings, attitudes, desires, and spiritual commitment.”<sup>12</sup>

Determining whether we have been born again and to what extent we have experienced this mighty change requires a self-examination of our countenances. This examination is not conducted in front of any physical mirror but through sincere soul-searching and by listening to the still, small voice of the Spirit. The Holy Ghost will help us to answer the question: Is our renewed commitment to follow the Savior discernible in our countenance, both in our appearance and, more importantly, in our actions? Sometimes we may recognize the level of spiritual regeneration we have experienced as much by what we do as by what we feel. “If a man bringeth forth good works,” declared Alma, “he hearkeneth unto the voice of the good shepherd” (Alma 5:41). Our countenance becomes engraven with the image of God as we continue to exercise faith in the Redeemer, repent of our sins, and strive to keep God’s commandments. As we are spiritually reborn again and again and again—each time being elevated to a higher level of spirituality—our countenance, or more precisely, our behavior, becomes more like him whom we seek to

emulate (see 3 Ne. 27:21, 27). C. S. Lewis provides us with a profound insight regarding the spiritual rebirth process that may help us to better understand what Alma may have meant when he asked, "Have ye received his image in your countenances?" "Christ, here and now, in that very room where you are saying your prayers, is doing things to you. It is not a question of a good man who died two thousand years ago. It is a living Man, still as much a man as you, and still as much God as He was when He created the world, really coming and interfering with your very self; killing the old natural self in you and replacing it with the kind of self He has. At first, only for moments. Then for longer periods. Finally, if all goes well, turning you permanently into a different sort of thing; into . . . a being which, in its own small way, has the same kind of life as God; which shares His power, joy, knowledge and eternity."<sup>13</sup>

### Retaining a Remission of Sins

Being born again and receiving forgiveness of our sins does not mean that we have arrived at spiritual maturity or that we are guaranteed eternal life, nor does it mean that we can never lose the fruits of that spiritual rebirth. "It is a possibility that one may be born of the Spirit and then, because of his sinfulness or slothfulness, he may lose the Spirit and fall from grace," President Harold B. Lee stated. "The Spirit will not dwell in unholy tabernacles."<sup>14</sup> This important realization is reflected in the searching question posed by Alma as he taught the Saints in Zarahemla concerning the spiritual rebirth he called a mighty change. It is a question that we today must continually ask of ourselves: "If ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?" (Alma 5:26). Implicit in Alma's question is the reality that once a person has received the baptism of fire and has known and experienced the fruits of spiritual rebirth, if he becomes slothful or sinful he may lose the desire "to sing the song of redeeming love." What then can be done to recapture that spiritual regeneration?

"I would that ye should remember to retain the name written always in your hearts," King Benjamin admonished his people after their hearts had been changed, "that ye are not found on the left hand of God, but that ye hear and know the voice by which

ye shall be called, and also, the name by which he shall call you" (Mosiah 5:12; see also 5:7-10). King Benjamin counseled his people that in order for them to retain or regain their spiritual rebirth in Christ, they must exercise faith in Christ, repent of their sins, and strive to keep the commandments all the days of their lives. Those attitudes and actions that initially led them to be born of God will also result in a retention or reclamation of that newness of life.

And again, believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you; and now, if you believe all these things see that ye do them. And again I say unto you as I have said before, that as ye have come to the knowledge of the glory of God, or if ye have known of his goodness and have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins, which causeth such exceedingly great joy in your souls, even so I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility, calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith. . . . And behold, I say unto you that if ye do this ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God, and always retain a remission of your sins; and ye shall grow in the knowledge of the glory of him that created you, or in the knowledge of that which is just and true (Mosiah 4:10-12).

King Benjamin's exhortations are as relevant to us today as they were when given to his own people. If we are to retain God's image in our countenance and his divine love in our hearts, we will, as Nephi declared, "Press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life" (2 Ne. 31:20).

We may learn from the New Testament of the necessity of being born of the water and of the Spirit to gain salvation. It is, however, through the teachings and examples given in the Book of Mormon that we learn what that really entails, how it is to be achieved, and what it does for and to us. But perhaps most importantly, we learn from the Book of Mormon that becoming a new creature in Christ is a lifetime endeavor. Birth— even spiritual rebirth— is just a beginning. Just because we may have once had



our hearts “changed through faith on [Christ’s] name” and our sins burned from our souls through the baptism of fire, we cannot let go of the iron rod. Pressing forward—holding on to the iron rod unceasingly—will inevitably lead to the tree of life. For this reason King Benjamin’s final exhortation to his people—a people who had been born of God and had commenced a new life—is our charge today as well: “Therefore, I would that ye should be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works, that Christ, the Lord God Omnipotent, may seal you his, that you may be brought to heaven, that ye may have everlasting salvation and eternal life, through the wisdom, and power, and justice, and mercy of him who created all things, in heaven and in earth, who is God above all. Amen” (Mosiah 5:15).

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## Notes

1. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 162.
2. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:324–25.
3. Orson Pratt, “The Holy Spirit,” 49–64, in *Orson Pratt: The Writings of an Apostle*, Mormon Collector Series, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Mormon Heritage, 1976), 57.
4. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 290.
5. McConkie, “Be Ye Converted” (address given at the BYU First Stake Quarterly Conference, 11 February 1968), 12.
6. McConkie, “Jesus Christ and Him Crucified,” *1976 Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1977), 399.
7. Larry E. Dahl, “The Doctrine of Christ,” in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, the Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr.

(Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 366.

8. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 96; emphasis added.

9. Wilford Woodruff, "Blessings of the Saints—Training of Children," in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 8:268.

10. John Taylor, "Union, etc.," in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:318.

11. Robert L. Millet, "The New Birth," *The Power of the Word* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 112.

12. Andrew C. Skinner, "Alma's Pure Testimony," *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 7: 1 Nephi to Alma 29*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 301.

13. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952), 165.

14. Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 64.