



doctrine and covenants 20

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dc 20.¹⁻⁴— meditation

¹The rise of the Church of Christ in these last days, being one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the flesh, it being regularly organized and established agreeable to the laws of our country, by the will and commandments of God, in the fourth month, and on the sixth day of the month which is called April—²which commandments were given to Joseph Smith, Jun., who was called of God, and ordained an apostle of Jesus Christ, to be the first elder of this church; ³and to Oliver Cowdery, who was also called of God, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to be the second elder of this church, and ordained under his hand; ⁴and this according to the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom be all glory, both now and forever. Amen.

When considering individuals called as apostles, we often focus on the individual, the preparatory experiences they have had leading up to the call, and their personal worthiness or goodness. We might then say something like, “they were called according to their talents and faithful record of service.” However, in announcing his and Oliver’s calling as apostles, there is no such focus on the two men. The two men were not called because of their goodness, but because of Jesus’ goodness, or, in the language of Joseph, “according to the grace [read, “generosity” or “accepting nature”] of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

In fact, in the next verse, we will be reminded that Joseph had, as every other mortal man and mortal woman ever has or ever will, required “a remission of his sins” and that even after such a blessed event, he, like all the rest of us, was “entangled again in the vanities of the world.”

It is little wonder that in seeing Jesus and then his 12 disciples— aka, apostles—Lehi saw that Jesus’ “luster” was brighter than that “of the sun at noon-day” while that of his combined 12 was likened to “the stars in the firmament.”¹ It is obvious why Isaiah, Jeremiah, Paul, Nephi, and many others have warned of the foolishness and disappointment in putting one’s trust in the arm of flesh. We appreciate, too, Joseph Smith’s humble candor and quiet reminder found here in this reading. It not only serves as a reminder that God is faithful and dependable far, far above man, but also serves as encouragement for us to rely upon God far, far more than any man or woman, however exalted he or she may seem.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: October 24, 2024)

¹ 1 Nephi 1.⁹⁻¹⁰

⁵After it was truly manifested unto this first elder that he had received a remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world; ⁶but after repenting, and humbling himself sincerely, through faith, God ministered unto him by an holy angel, whose countenance was as lightning, and whose garments were pure and white above all other whiteness; ⁷and gave unto him commandments which inspired him...

In this section's opening verses, Joseph identified himself as having been called as "an apostle of Jesus Christ." This call came "according to," or "because of" or "consistent with" "the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." In these verses, we are reminded why the call was an act of grace and undeserved generosity on the part of God.

After having "received a remission of his sins, Joseph was entangled again in the vanities of the world." The "remission of sins" mentioned here is a reference to Joseph's experience during his "First Vision" when he, according to his 1832 account, heard the voice of God speak the comforting and remitting words, "Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee." That he "was entangled again in the vanities of the world" is confirmed in the long, painful, and honest confession he made on the night when "God ministered unto him by an holy angel," Moroni. In that confession, Joseph speaks of his "foolish errors," "weakness," "foibles," "temptations offensive in the sight of God," "guilt," "imperfections," "sins," and "follies" for all of which he "felt condemned" and for which he sought forgiveness

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As we follow Joseph in his career, we have every reason to justifiably think of Joseph, as all of us are, as a serial sinner from beginning to end. Whether we think of the willfulness Joseph demonstrated in losing the 115 manuscript pages, or the lying and abuse associated with his attempt to conceal his polygamous activities, or the deeply autocratic, near tyrannical style of leadership that he exhibited in Nauvoo toward the end of his life, we must agree that his calling—whether it be given the name "first elder," "apostle," "president," or "prophet"—was indeed an act of grace, indicative of the Lord's accepting and forgiving nature. And we can all take comfort and find reason for hope in Joseph Smith's own wild ride on the roller coaster of sin and weakness.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: October 24, 2024)

¹ See JSH 1.²⁸⁻²⁹

⁸And gave him power from on high, by the means which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon; ⁹which contains a record of a fallen people, and the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and to the Jews also; ¹⁰which was given by inspiration, and is confirmed to others by the ministering of angels, and is declared unto the world by them—¹¹proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old; ¹²thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever. Amen.

Both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants catalogue what seem to them to be the principal contents of the Book of Mormon and the purposes for the Book's existence today. Among the many that could be named, this reading identifies two of the Book's important content elements. It contains "a record of a fallen people" and "the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ." As to purposes of the Book of Mormon, this reading identifies three among the many that could be named: proof that "the holy scriptures are true," proof that "God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age," and evidence that God "is the same God yesterday, today, and forever."

In my lifetime, a new title page has been added to the Book of Mormon: "Another Testament of Christ." It has become fashionable to read the Book almost exclusively for this testimony. I don't know how many times I have been encouraged to read the Book with the goal, for example, of finding Christ's titles or even to identify every passage in which he or the purposes of his life are identified. This is all well and good. One could do worse. But to read only for such content is myopic and unwise. No book, not one written by mere mortals and certainly not one inspired by God, has just one purpose or goal.

Today's text reminds us that the Book of Mormon is "a record of a fallen people." This reminder captures our attention. It is an important part of the Book's reason for being. Now, it is common for us to say that the Book of Mormon contains "a record of the Nephites," or "a record of the former inhabitants." But here we are reminded that it is more than that: it is "a record of a *fallen* people."

The Book of Mormon is a record of a people, of a nation that existed for many hundreds of years. Hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of people were born into the nation, lived their whole lives in it, and died in it. It seemed to most that things would go on, and on, and on. The universe revolved around the nation. All things existed for it. But, they were wrong. The time came when the nation died. Disappeared from existence. Became nothing more than a distant memory.

Here, then, is another reason for the Book's existence and another important thing to read for. How and why did the people whose society it follows fall? What were the weaknesses that brought their society to extinction? And, what about us today? What kind of "people" are we? Do we see the same seeds of decay in our society that the Book identifies in theirs? If so, what do we do about it?

Yes, the Book not only contains a message that, if heeded and applied, brings about the personal redemption of individuals through faith in Christ. It also contains a message that, if heeded and applied, can strengthen society and help it avoid the evils that will lead to its fall. We would do well to pay careful attention to both these messages, among many others. Such "multitasking" honors the Book more than any singular focus, however honorable, ever can.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: October 24, 2024)

²⁵That as many as would believe and be baptized in his holy name, and endure in faith to the end, should be saved—²⁶not only those who believed after he came in the meridian of time, in the flesh, but all those from the beginning, even as many as were before he came, who believed in the words of the holy prophets, who spake as they were inspired by the gift of the Holy Ghost, who truly testified of him in all things, should have eternal life, ²⁷as well as those who should come after, who should believe in the gifts and callings of God by the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of the Father and of the Son; ²⁸which Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God, infinite and eternal, without end. Amen.

We are sometimes better readers than we think. We know how to find the main ideas of the sentences and paragraphs we read. Without knowing their grammatical names, we know to look for subjects, verbs, and direct objects in order to identify principal actors, what they do, and to whom they do it. We know that parenthetical phrases are... well... parenthetical; something “put in beside,” “an aside.” We can sometimes, then, lightly pass over parenthetical statements, deeming them to contain less important information.

Oh, how very wrong we would be to pass lightly over the parenthetical statement found in verses 26-28 of today’s reading—identified by a dash, —, rather than parenthetical markings ()!

We humans are so often so crimped in our views of and exclusionary in our conduct toward those who are different than us. Israelites could not imagine God having anything to do with “gentiles.” “Gentiles” have harbored and nourished antisemitic feelings almost as long. Early Christians found a God who willingly embraced gentiles perplexing. It took a long time and many debates before they accepted such an expansive and inclusive God.

Elsewhere, those with darker skin who lived in warmer southern climes, recognized light skinned, blue eyed, blond people as “other,” often targeting them for persecution and murder, often in the name of the gods. Citing obscure Bible passages, light skinned Europeans who came to America excluded dark skinned Africans from the promises of America, enslaving them and building a nation on blood-soaked, no-cost labor. Round, wide-eyed westerners feared brown skinned people with slanted eyes, while those same brown skinned people with slanted eyes feared the light skinned people with wide rounded eyes. We fear the other. We exclude “the other” from the joys we so ardently seek for ourselves.

Unfortunately, all too often religion becomes little more than justification for wicked exclusion. We think of the Zoramites of Book of Mormon fame. What could be a better example of exclusionary hate-speech than the arrogant and abhorrent prayer that they offered at Rameumptum in celebration of their own exceptionalism and their exclusive election? Their wickedness and hate is seen in their treatment of the poor among them whom they self-righteously excluded from worshipping God, and thus excluded *from* God.

What, the reader may ask, does all of this have to do with today’s reading? In this reading, we find for the first time in centuries, perhaps millennia, the first hint of the expansiveness and inclusiveness of God toward a group that was the target of the grand-daddy of all pinched and exclusive perspectives: the dead. Here we hear of the salvation “not only those who believed after he came in the meridian of time, in the flesh, but all those from the beginning, even as many as were before he came.”

How many had dared think such thoughts? How many dared think those who died without knowing

Christ to be within the embrace of God? How many dared think of such an expansive and inclusive God? How many dare today to imagine that the limits of his expansive and inclusive acceptance has not yet been reached; that God has more territory and more needy to win?

If we have not yet learned from the centuries of pain inflicted on the excluded, let us at least learn from this revealed God, whose saving power has reached over and over again beyond boundaries thought possible. Non-Levites holding the priesthood. Non-Israelites, saved. Lepers cleansed. The possessed set free. The dead redeemed. Black men and women being endowed.

God is not done yet, I suspect, expanding the borders of His kingdom. There are more surprises to come; plenty more room yet for those who, even now, are excluded by selfish, insecure, pinched, and wicked exclusion. Yes, more and plenty! That's what I learned from a parenthetical phrase.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: October 24, 2024)

³⁷*And again, by way of commandment to the church concerning the manner of baptism—*

All those who
humble themselves before God,
and desire to be baptized,
and come forth with broken hearts and contrite spirits,
and witness before the church that they have truly repented of all their sins,
and are willing to take upon them the name of Jesus Christ,
having a determination to serve him to the end,
and truly manifest by their works that they have received of the Spirit of Christ unto the remission
of their sins,
shall be received by baptism into his church.

Not long after Joseph Smith had written DC 20.37, Oliver Cowdery wrote him, as Joseph reported, “to inform me that he had discovered an error in one of the commandments—Book of Doctrine and Covenants: ‘And truly manifest by their works that they have received of the Spirit of Christ unto a remission of their sins.’ The above quotation, he said, was erroneous, and added: ‘I command you in the name of God to erase those words, that no priestcraft be amongst us!’”¹

The objection to the passage seems to have been both theological and operational. Oliver envisioned baptism as bringing about or making possible the remission of sins. In his view, baptism was a prerequisite of forgiveness. However, this passage seems to envision baptism as a sign that one has already received a remission of sins. In this view, being forgiven is a prerequisite of baptism.

In one view, baptism points to the future, in the other, to the past.

Whatever one thinks about Oliver’s “presumption” in correcting a prophet, the view he had of baptism seems to reflect the Church’s current understanding—if not explicitly stated in doctrinal terms, certainly evidenced through policy and procedure. Potential converts are not required to demonstrate either through word or action that they *have* received a remission of sins. They are, however, promised that they *might* be so blessed as the result of baptism.

Practically speaking, one can find advantages and disadvantages in both views. For example, “convert retention” has always been a matter of concern. Entrance and exit to and from Church activity is a bit of a revolving door. It stands to reason that converts who were expected to demonstrate in word and deed before their baptism that they had already experienced the peace and empowerment of forgiveness through the atonement of Jesus Christ and a personal encounter with him would make for a stronger and more enduring member. Retention would increase among such converts.

This advantage, however, comes with a disadvantage. Many who were baptized in the past would certainly have not been baptized had this standard been in place—my own faithful mother, being one of them. Many more would be excluded at present and in the future. This means fewer converts. But, this disadvantage isn’t numerical, it is ministerial. The higher standard reduces the number of opportunities to influence a greater number of people.

¹ *HC*, Vol. 1, p. 105

“Relaxing” this standard brings more converts. But, again, the advantage is less about numbers than about the capacity to minister. Though these converts may be weaker than if the standard were higher, they are at least in the Church’s sphere of influence, potentially for an extended period of time. As they sit in services and meetings week after week hearing the word of God, and as they develop relationships and trust with those who can bear a personal, living witness of Jesus and his willingness and ability to forgive, the possibility of their having their own encounter with Jesus unto the remission of sins increases.

It is, then, a trade off. With relaxed baptismal requirements, the Church has the potential for more, though weaker converts, and more influence in their lives over potentially extended periods of time. With more stringent baptismal requirements, the Church has fewer, though stronger converts, and less influence over a more pinched time frame in the lives of fewer individuals.

In the end, though, it comes down to one’s view of “Church.” Is “Church,” as some have put it, a museum for Saints, or a hospital for sinners? If it is the former, then the doors remain closed to all but those who can pass the most robust entrance exam to the most exclusive of clubs. If “Church” is designed as a place where the “saint” finds safety, comfort, and refuge from a wicked world, then a more robust form of initiation is required.

If “Church” is the latter, then the doors remain wide open to all sinners who wish to partake of Jesus’ healing balm, however long it takes and however many detours there may be along the way. If “church” is a place where all sinners gather and labor together, sometimes uncomfortably, for healing and improvement, then we loosen the initiation requirements so that there are as many chances to influence as often as possible with as many people as possible.

Whichever definition one adopts, there will be times when some threaten the enterprise and must be removed from it. For there must be an element of refuge in the Church—a place of refuge *from* sin, or a place of refuge *in* sin. Such threats, however, rare as they are, are as likely to come from those who are “too righteous” as from those who are “too sinful.”

So, what is it... this thing we call “Church”? Museum or hospital? Is it an exclusive place reserved for the redeemed, or is it an inclusive place open to all sinners who seek redemption? Can it be both? Can the redeemed abide the sinner? Can the sinner endure the redeemed? What think ye? And how do your attitudes and behaviors square with your thought?

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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