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Source: *The Book of Mormon: Alma, The Testimony of The Word*

Editor(s): Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr.

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 1992

Page(s): 89-105



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Instruments in the Hands of God: The Message of Alma 17–27

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Clyde J. Williams

The approach one takes when reading the Book of Mormon can make a significant difference in the information gained or the principles learned from it. It is my view that the greatest benefit from the Book of Mormon comes when we apply what we read to our lives and to our time. In emphasizing the importance of this principle President Ezra Taft Benson declared, “The Book of Mormon was written for us today. . . . God, who knows the end from the beginning, told [Mormon] what to include in his abridgement that we would need for our day” (“Book of Mormon” 63). In approaching the missionary experiences of Ammon and his brothers, one of the most important lessons for us to learn is how they are relevant to our time.

The Mission Approach

Prior to their missions, the sons of Mosiah, along with Alma, had made a mighty change in their lives, turning from persecuting the Church to building it up. Ammon and his brothers had a compelling desire to take the gospel to the Lamanites, who at this time were still mortal enemies of the Nephites. As recorded in Mosiah 28:3, “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

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thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble.” When they asked their father, king Mosiah, for permission to go and preach the gospel to the Lamanites (Mosiah 28:5), it must have seemed to him that it would be certain death to send his sons among the Lamanites. It would be like sending our sons on a mission to Iraq during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. They would have to go without visas, and their arrival in that country would be unannounced. Perhaps in this light, we can better appreciate the deep concerns Mosiah must have felt.

The approach which Mosiah took to ask of the Lord for assurance that his sons’ planned mission was appropriate, has significant application for parents today whose sons or daughters are called to mission areas where there may be risks. Certainly all parents, as well as missionaries, are entitled, as was Mosiah, to receive a confirmation from the Lord that, despite the risks, the mission call is right (see Mosiah 28:6–8).

Mosiah’s sons demonstrated the kind of courage and commitment that is essential for successful missionaries. Not only were they willing to risk their lives and go to a difficult mission area, but they were also willing to give up their right to their father’s throne (Alma 17:6). This willingness to sacrifice worldly power, positions, and possessions is a virtue to be sought by all who desire to serve the Lord.

Instruments in the Hands of God

Ammon and his brothers desired “that they might be an instrument in the hands of God” to teach the Lamanites the gospel (Alma 17:9). The Lord emphasized the concept of being an instrument in his hands when he declared, “Wherefore, I call upon the weak things of the world, those who are unlearned and despised, to thrash the nations by the power of my spirit; And their arm shall be my arm” (D&C 35:13–14). Perhaps the following examples will illustrate the significance of being proper instruments in the Lord’s hands.

Some years ago I was building a shed next to my home. I had some three-inch screws which I was using to build a frame for some shelving. I asked my son to go over to the neighbors and borrow a power drill so that “turning the screws in” would not be such a tedious job. He returned with a rechargeable power drill. I thought, this will be great, no cord to worry about or step on. However, I found that as I tried to put in the screws the drill would take them in about half-way and then the power would give out. The battery powered drill did not have sufficient power for the difficult task. I told my son to take the drill back and ask the neighbor for his other drill because the rechargeable one did not have enough power for the job I was doing. When he returned with the other drill, we plugged it into the outlet in our home. I found that I now had more than enough power to drive the screws all the way into the wood. Both power drills were instruments in my hands; however, only one was able to perform the task that I needed done.

As missionaries and servants of the Lord we might ask ourselves, Am I like the rechargeable drill trying to get by on spirituality stored up from past experiences, or am I striving to be in tune continually so I am like a power drill that is plugged into the source of all power? Ammon and his brothers understood this principle and thus, because of their preparation, they were like fine precision tools in the hands of the Lord. They were continually “plugged in” to the eternal source of power.

Characteristics of Successful Missionaries

To be a powerful precision instrument in the hands of the Lord should be the desire of all faithful members of the Church. The story of the mission of the sons of Mosiah among the Lamanites is full of principles that will help missionaries and members be more successful in their work of sharing the gospel.

Scriptural Knowledge

From the time of their spiritual awakening, the sons of Mosiah recognized the importance of the scriptures in under-

standing the gospel and bringing others to a knowledge of the truth. As they went about seeking to repair the spiritual damage they had done, they were involved in diligently “explaining the prophecies and the scriptures to all who desired to hear them” (Mosiah 27:35).

The scriptural knowledge that these young men had acquired helped them throughout their mission among the Lamanites. It was Ammon’s ability to rehearse and lay before king Lamoni “the records and the holy scriptures” and to “expound . . . the plan of redemption,” which led to the king’s conversion (Alma 18:36,39–42). Aaron was able to lead Lamoni’s father past his doubts of God’s existence by “expound[ing] unto him the scriptures . . . and also the plan of redemption” (Alma 22:13).

In each case where the scriptures are mentioned during this Lamanite mission, specific reference is made to Christ, his coming into the world, his atonement, and his resurrection (see Alma 18:39; 21:9; 22:13–14). Then, as today, the main focus of the missionary message is helping people to “come unto Christ.”

Alma’s description of the sons of Mosiah following their fourteen-year mission shows their love of the scriptures: “They had waxed strong in the knowledge of truth; for they were men of sound understanding and they had searched the scriptures diligently, that they might know the word of God” (Alma 17:2). The success of today’s missionaries will certainly be influenced by the degree of scriptural knowledge and understanding they possess. It should be noted that the depth of understanding attributed to the sons of Mosiah came over a period of several years of “diligent,” not casual, searching of the scriptures. The Lord has instructed missionaries in this dispensation to “first seek to obtain my word, and then shall your tongues be loosed” (D&C 11:21–22).

Fasting and Prayer

Recognizing the need to have the Lord help in their righteous endeavor to take the gospel to the Lamanites, Ammon and his brothers engaged in much fasting and prayer. They understood that prayer is the primary means for us humans to communicate with our Heavenly Father and that “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much”(James 5:16). It is likely that they also understood that it was their fasting and prayers that would enable them to have the Spirit of the Lord help them be more effective instruments in the hands of the Lord (Alma 17:9). As the Spirit came upon them, they were given comfort and the strength they needed to face the significant challenges they were to experience as missionaries (Alma 17:10). The same is true in missionary work today: the more we are worthy of the Spirit the better we can function as effective instruments for the Lord.

Patience and Overcoming Discouragement

As Ammon and his brethren prepared to leave on their missions to the Lamanites, many of the Nephites laughed at them and ridiculed them for thinking that they could convert the sin-hardened Lamanites to the gospel. They suggested that it would be better to take up arms and seek to destroy the Lamanites (see Alma 26:23–25). Nevertheless, Ammon and his companions went forward on their mission. As they approached the land of the Lamanites, however, their hearts became depressed and they “were about to turn back”(Alma 26:27). Their discouragement occurred, perhaps, because of the ridicule and doubt expressed by some of the Nephite people, and because of the efforts of the Adversary.

At this critical time the Lord comforted these young missionaries and reminded them that they would need to be “patient in long-suffering and afflictions” (Alma 17:11). In the words of President Ezra Taft Benson, “There are times when you simply have to righteously hang on and outlast the devil

until his depressive spirit leaves you. . . . To press on in noble endeavors, even while surrounded by a cloud of depression, will eventually bring you out on top into the sunshine” (“Do Not Despair” 67). Even though Ammon and his companions were mocked, spat upon, stoned, and cast into prison during their fourteen-year mission, they followed the Lord’s council that if they would bear their afflictions patiently, “I will give unto you success”(see Alma 26:27–29).

While most missionaries today will not face imprisonment or stoning, they will nevertheless face discouragement and have their patience tried. A positive example of the power of patience was related to Elder L. Tom Perry by a mission president. This man remembered being a young nineteen-year-old called to serve a mission in Brazil. On this missionary’s very first day in the field, a minister called his small congregation out of a church to shout names at the missionaries as they walked by. Some of the group became more violent and began to throw rocks. Suddenly a rock hit this young man in the back. In anger the young missionary picked up a rock and wheeled around. Having been a baseball pitcher, his immediate desire was to throw the rock. However, he caught himself, and instead of throwing it at the crowd he threw the rock at a telephone pole some distance away, hitting it squarely in the middle. The crowd stopped, realizing that the telephone pole could have been any one of their heads. Their mood changed, and from then on, whenever the missionaries went down that street, they were challenged to a rock-throwing contest. “The rock-throwing contests led to discussions of the gospel, which led to conversions, which led to the establishment of a branch of the Church in that community” (Perry 3).

The patience of this young missionary ultimately prepared the way for the Lord’s Spirit to touch the hearts of the people. It took fourteen years of patience for Ammon and his brethren to see the full results of their labors.

Good Examples

Ammon and his companions were instructed to “show forth good examples” (Alma 17:11). To be a good example is to have Christ’s image in our countenances. Ammon and his friends were watched continually by the Lamanites, and their conduct had a tremendous impact on their success as missionaries. Ammon’s example of service to king Lamoni in defending his flocks and in defending him in front of his father opened the door to the missionary work which would occur at this time among the Lamanites.

Modern day members and missionaries cannot escape the fact that those around them are watching their behavior. In the words of President Gordon B. Hinckley:

This entire people have become as a city upon a hill which cannot be hid. Sometimes we take offense when one who is a member of the Church is involved in a crime and the public press is quick to say that he is a Mormon. We comment among ourselves that if he had been a member of any other church, no mention would have been made of it.

Yet, is not this very practice an indirect compliment to our people? The world expects something better of us and when one of our number falters, the press is quick to note it. (4)

For us to be effective instruments in the hands of the Lord requires that we seek to be a “light unto the world” (D&C 103:9). Had Ammon and his brothers failed to be a “light” to the Lamanites, they would have failed. The impact of failing to be a good example was brought home to me through reading about the experience of two missionaries who, while serving in a foreign land, found some old American rifles. After obtaining the rifles, they got up on top of the local chapel and began shooting at stray cats. The people throughout the neighborhood began to refer to the missionaries as the “Latter-day Cat Haters.” The result was that their ability to reach the people was destroyed, and they had to be transferred from the area (Jacobs 138–139).

Serve the People

After he and his brothers had separated, Ammon was captured by the Lamanites and taken before king Lamoni. Ammon explained to the king that it was his desire to live among the Lamanites “perhaps until the day I die” (Alma 17:23). Furthermore, he told king Lamoni that it was his desire to be his servant (see Alma 17:25). This must have impressed the king. It was his service in this role, caring for the king’s sheep and horses, that Ammon was able to begin to “open the hearts” of the Lamanites. We could say that it was Ammon’s service which opened Lamoni’s heart.

Service has always been a vital part of the gospel. The Savior’s life was one large service project for the benefit of mankind. For modern-day missionaries, service is still a significant part of missionary work.

An experience that demonstrates the power of service was related by Elder Robert E. Wells.

Two elders met and taught a professor with credentials from Heidelberg and the Sorbonne. His mind was not open to their message, but the man had to go to the hospital for surgery. While he was recuperating in the hospital, his yard and garden suffered. The two missionaries felt impressed to use their preparation day to mow his lawn, trim the hedge, and weed the flowers.

The wife told her husband what they had done. He sent for the elders to come to the hospital, and with tears in his eyes he said, “Never in my entire adult life has anyone ever gone out of his way to do anything for me.”

His demeanor changed. He listened to the missionary discussions. Previously skeptical, he now paid rapt attention and visibly became more meek and humble. He prayed for the first time since he was a child, and he received a testimony and was baptized. (28)

The power of service in changing and touching the hearts of men is inestimable. When properly rendered, service is an expression of love. It is the love of God and his children that motivated Ammon and his brethren and should motivate all who desire to be servants of the Lord.

Put the Lord and His Work First

When Ammon was first brought before king Lamoni, the king offered him one of his daughters for a wife (see Alma 17:23–25). Ammon declined this offer, stayed on his mission and put the Lord and His work first.

When Ammon was tending the king's sheep along with the other servants of the king, he rejoiced when the wicked Lamanites came and scattered the sheep. This was not because he enjoyed trouble or because he liked to fight his enemies. Rather, Ammon rejoiced because he knew that this confrontation would open the door for him to "show forth . . . unto these my fellow-servants . . . the power which is in me . . . that I may win the hearts of these my fellow-servants, that I may lead them to believe in my words" (Alma 17:29). Ammon was not concerned about his life or his status. He was concerned for the Lord and His work.

All who serve missions must realize that they are not there to find an eternal companion, to impress others with their number of baptisms, to learn how to be more organized or disciplined, or to master a foreign language so they can be more successful in life. While some of these may occur as a natural result of faithful service in the mission field, the primary purpose of serving a mission is to serve the Lord by helping to bring people unto him. Ammon understood this concept and was thereby enabled to find much success as a missionary.

Be Faithful

After Ammon had "disarmed" those who tried to kill him as he defended the king's flocks, the other servants reported this spectacular event to the king. As a "testimony" of what had happened, they also carried the arms of the men Ammon had wounded to the king (see Alma 17:39).

The king was amazed at the courage and power Ammon had displayed and began to wonder if Ammon were the "Great Spirit." When he asked where Ammon was, he was told that Ammon was feeding the king's horses. King Lamoni's response

was “surely there has not been any servant among all my servants that has been so faithful as this man” (Alma 18:10). Ammon was no ordinary servant. He had been extraordinarily faithful in carrying out every command that the king had given him. This faithfulness further served to open the king’s heart to Ammon’s message.

The application of this principle to members and missionaries today is that being effective servants in the kingdom requires faith. We must be faithful to the commandments, to the mission rules (if we are missionaries), to those presiding over us, to those we serve, and most of all, to our Heavenly Father and the trust he has in us.

The Power of Discernment

After caring for the king’s horses, Ammon came before king Lamoni. Awe-struck by Ammon’s power and ability, the king was fearful of speaking to him (see Alma 18:11–15). It was in this circumstance that Ammon relied on the Spirit to enable him to perceive king Lamoni’s thoughts (see Alma 18:16). Ammon could then determine how to respond to Lamoni and his unspoken concerns.

In a similar way, the Lord will help his modern-day servants perceive the thoughts or feelings of those they are teaching. This perception may not be as dramatic as in the case with king Lamoni, but the Lord “knows all the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Alma 18:32). I remember many times as a young missionary when the Lord would help me perceive the lack of understanding, the questioning, or the rejection of our teachings on the part of those we were instructing. They did not have to say anything—we could discern it by the Spirit. The spirit of discernment can enable one to be a more effective teacher and servant of the Lord. Such was the case with Ammon.

Divine Protection

After Ammon had taught the plan of redemption to Lamoni and his family, they were all overcome by the Spirit in a

remarkable manner. It was in this situation with all, including Ammon, in a spiritual trance, that Ammon's life was threatened. Among those who had gathered to witness this unusual occurrence were some of those who had been scattering the king's sheep at the waters of Sebus. One of the men, whose brother had been slain by Ammon, stepped forward and attempted to kill Ammon as he lay unconscious on the ground. As he lifted up his sword, he was struck dead (see Alma 19:18–22). Mormon notes that this was in fulfillment of the promise the Lord made to king Mosiah concerning his sons: "I will deliver thy sons out of the hands of the Lamanites" (Mosiah 28:7).

This experience is not cited to imply that no harm will ever come to righteous servants of the Lord. As mentioned previously, Ammon and his brethren experienced many hardships including being beaten, stoned, and cast into prison (see Alma 26:29). The Lord has promised his servants in this dispensation that He would go before them and "be on [their] right hand and on [their] left" and preserve them as they seek to spread the gospel throughout the nations of the earth (see D&C 84:88; 35:13–15). Undoubtedly this promise holds true unless one is "appointed unto death" or, as in some cases, "the Lord suffereth the righteous to be slain that his justice and judgment may come upon the wicked" (see D&C 42:48; Alma 60:13).

Many missionaries today have received promises of divine protection during their settings-apart, in patriarchal blessings, or in their father's blessings. I am convinced that when the "mighty works of God" (D&C 88:109) are unfolded for this dispensation, we shall see countless examples of the hand of the Lord providing protection for his servants as they go about the work of spreading the gospel throughout the world.

The Lord Will Direct Your Path

Following the conversion of king Lamoni and his family and the establishment of the Church among his people, Lamoni requested that Ammon go with him to meet his father. However, the voice of the Lord warned Ammon not to go to the land where

Lamoni's father lived because his life would be in danger. The Spirit then instructed him to go and deliver his brother Aaron and his companions out of prison in the land of Middoni (see Alma 20:1–2). This experience demonstrates the principle that when the Lord's servants are about his work, the Spirit will direct them as to where they should go and whom they should see.

Nephi, son of Lehi, was "led by the spirit not knowing beforehand" what he should do as he returned the third time to attempt to get the plates of Laban (1 Nephi 4:6). Modern-day occurrences of the Lord's servants' being led by the Spirit are not infrequent.

One such example was related by Joseph Olschewski, a resident of Midvale, Utah. Two missionaries were driving early one morning down a road in the mountain countryside of eastern Oregon. The elder in the passenger seat turned to his companion and told him that he felt impressed to turn around and go up a little dead-end lane they had just passed. There was a home at the end of the lane, and so they went to the door and knocked. A man answered the door and after the missionaries had introduced themselves they were invited into the home.

The man went in and got his wife. He then explained that they had just brought their newborn daughter home from the hospital. The baby was suffering from a serious heart disease, for which the doctors had given up all hope of cure after numerous tests and various medications. (This experience occurred some years before the development of open heart surgery.) The doctors had told the couple that the child would not live for more than a few weeks and that they could leave her in the hospital, or take her home for the few weeks she would live.

The couple then asked the missionaries if they would pray for their baby. The missionaries explained the process of priesthood blessings and explained the Church's belief in the power of fasting and prayer. They invited the couple to fast with them for one day. The missionaries returned the next day and gave

the little girl a blessing. In the blessing they were inspired to promise that the child would be healed of the heart disease.

The couple continued to be taught the gospel and were eventually baptized. Upon examining the child a short time later, the doctors found that the heart disease had disappeared, a fact which they were at a loss to explain. The Lord is concerned about his work, and will direct his servants if they are worthy and listen for the promptings of the Spirit.

Love the People

As Ammon and Lamoni were headed for the land of Middoni to gain the release of Aaron and his companions, they unexpectedly met Lamoni's father. When Lamoni's father saw that his son had befriended a Nephite, he was full of anger. He commanded king Lamoni to kill Ammon, and when Lamoni would not, his father drew his sword to slay Lamoni. At this point Ammon intervened and defended Lamoni both in word and with the sword, withstanding the efforts of Lamoni's father. When Lamoni's father saw that Ammon could slay him, he began to plead for his life. As Ammon spoke, Lamoni's father was deeply impressed with the "great love [Ammon] had for his son Lamoni" (see Alma 20:8-27).

It is significant that it was not Ammon's strength or his ability to speak which had the greatest effect upon Lamoni's father. Rather, it was the great love Ammon showed for Lamoni, even being willing to defend him from physical harm, which so deeply affected Lamoni's father. Because of the love and example of Ammon, Lamoni's father was anxious to be taught about the gospel (see Alma 20:27; 22:3). Love has the effect of opening the hearts of individuals. In the Lord's instructions through the prophet Joseph Smith, we are taught that love is among those characteristics which qualify one for the work of teaching the gospel (see D&C 4:5). The more we allow love to permeate our service to the Lord the more successful our efforts will be.

Appropriately Dealing with Agnostics

After Ammon and Lamoni obtained the release of Aaron and his companions, they returned to the land of Ishmael to teach Lamoni's people. However, Aaron and his companions were led by the Spirit to go and teach Lamoni's father, who was the king over all the land (see Alma 22:1). Lamoni's father was anxious to learn about the message that had made such a change in his son's life. Aaron's discussion with Lamoni's father is a great example of how to teach an agnostic, one who lacks belief in God (see Alma 22:7–18). Aaron expounded the scriptures to the king, explaining the creation, the plan of redemption, and the coming of Christ. Lamoni's father was so impressed with the message of the gospel that he said to Aaron, "I will give up *all* that I possess, yea, I will forsake my kingdom, that I may receive this great joy" (Alma 22:15; emphasis added). In contrast, when Lamoni's father was earlier faced with the fear of death, he promised Ammon up to "*half* of the kingdom" if he would spare him (Alma 20:23; emphasis added). It is interesting to note that the king's value of physical life was only half that of the value he placed on principles that would affect him eternally.

Aaron then outlined the steps that the king must take to obtain a testimony of God and His plan. These steps are recorded in Alma 22:16. First, one must have a desire to know about God and be born of him. Second, one must be willing to bow down and be humble before God. Third, there must be a willingness to repent of all one's sins. Fourth, one must call on the name of God and pray unto him. Fifth, the prayer must be offered with "faith, believing that ye shall receive." Sixth, the end result is the Lord's promise that those who follow these steps will receive the hope for eternal life which they desired.

King Lamoni's father's response demonstrates the humility and willing obedience that are required for one to come to a knowledge of God. His prayer found in Alma 22:18 is a fine example of a sincere prayer by an agnostic. Agnostics generally feel like hypocrites when asked to pray. They feel that

they cannot pray to someone whose existence they cannot prove. Consequently, Lamoni's father's words are very understandable. He said, "O God, Aaron hath told me that there is a God; and if there is a God, and if thou art God, wilt thou make thyself known unto me" (Alma 22:18). His willingness to give up all his sins as well as all he possessed illustrates the depth of commitment that is necessary to come to know God.

How Great Shall Be Your Joy

After Ammon, his brothers, and their companions had completed their missions among the Lamanites, they were amazed at the success the Lord had granted them. Many thousands of Lamanites had joined the Church of God (see Alma 23:5; 26:13). Their depth of commitment and strength of testimony were exceptional. Seldom has there been a group of converts so willing to put everything "on the line"—including their own lives. This success caused Ammon and his brethren to "rejoice exceedingly" (Alma 25:17).

Ammon's expression of his joy caused Aaron to voice concern that perhaps Ammon was beginning to boast of his success (see Alma 26:10). However, through Ammon's reply we can discern the principles upon which true joy is founded. First, Ammon stated that he was not boasting of his own strength or wisdom (Alma 26:11–12). He recognized that by himself he was nothing and that his joy had nothing to do with his personal abilities. Second, Ammon affirmed that his joyful expressions glorified God and His omnipotent power (see Alma 26:12) because through the power of God they had been enabled to perform marvelous works and miracles that were beyond the comprehension of mortal men. Third, Ammon explained that as he saw the many thousands of the Lamanites who had been freed from the "pains of hell" and brought to "sing redeeming love," he had great cause to rejoice (see Alma 26:13).

The joy that Ammon experienced has to be the kind of joy that Lehi referred to when he said "Men are that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25). This type of joy or happiness is, according

to the Prophet Joseph Smith, “the object and design of our existence; and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God” (Smith 255–56). Ammon and his brethren had been virtuous, faithful, holy, and obedient to the Lord’s commands. Thus, they experienced a great outpouring of joy. Divine joy is available to all who are willing to serve the Lord with the same degree of commitment as Ammon and his companions. In our own day, the Lord has promised “how great will be your joy if you should bring many souls unto me!” (D&C 18:16).

A Positive Reunion

To appreciate the joy that was felt when Alma and the sons of Mosiah were reunited once again, one must understand the events which preceded this reunion (see Alma 27:16–19). It was not merely a fourteen-year absence that caused them to rejoice. In the words of Alma, the greater joy came because “they were still his brethren in the Lord” (Alma 17:2). This was the case because they had done three things: 1) they had come to a sound understanding of the gospel, 2) they had searched the scriptures diligently, and 3) they had given themselves to much prayer and fasting (see Alma 17:2–3).

We have all experienced reunions of one kind or another in our lives, whether they be missionary reunions, family reunions, or reunions with old friends. The key to the degree of joy we feel is not just how long we have been apart, but how true have we remained to the principles of the gospel. The young missionaries of today will find that their future reunions with former companions will bring more joy if both have remained faithful to the principles of the gospel which they learned in the mission field. These earthly reunions are but a type for the greater reunion we will have one day with our Father in Heaven. Here too, the degree of joy experienced in that reunion will depend upon our ongoing faithfulness to the principles of the gospel during this life.

Conclusion

The unusual nature of the experiences the sons of Mosiah had—the fact that they served for fourteen years and the dramatic way in which those they taught were converted—may cause some to wonder whether these events are relevant to missionary work today. It is my feeling that these remarkable missionary experiences were not intended to present an unrealistic view of missionary work. It would seem highly unlikely that missionaries today can read these accounts and feel that their challenges are more ominous than those which Ammon and his brethren faced. Thus, they can know that the Lord will certainly help them in facing their challenges today.

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