



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL  
<http://bookofmormoncentral.com/>



Religious Studies Center  
<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

---

## Spiritual Rebirth

Author(s): S. Michael Wilcox

Source: *The Book of Mormon: Mosiah, Salvation Only Through Christ*

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

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 1991

Page(s): 247-260

---



The Religious Studies Center is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to scholarly research on the Book of Mormon. Items are archived by the permission of the Religious Studies Center.

<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

S. Michael Wilcox

**W**e are taught in the Doctrine and Covenants that the Light of Christ is given to every individual born into the world. If we heed that light, it will direct us to our Father (D&C 84:45–47), to eternal life. However, there is an obstacle which can block or hinder us from following the light of Christ back to the Father. This obstacle is an integral part of our mortal natures. It must be eliminated, or we will eventually be enslaved by the adversary. That which hinders us from responding more fully to the Light of Christ has several names in scripture, but most often it is called “the natural man,” “nature,” or “the flesh.” In order to overcome the natural man we must be born again through the atonement of Jesus Christ, and thereafter continue to progress spiritually through our faith and our actions.

## The Natural Man

Some believe the natural man is identical to the physical body and thus falsely condemn our earthly tabernacles. It is important to distinguish between the two. At the end of the Creation, God declared, “All things which I had made were very good” (Moses 2:31). Our physical body was included in that declaration. The Lord has also taught that “the elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy; and when separated, man cannot

---

S. Michael Wilcox is assistant professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University.



receive a fulness of joy” (D&C 93:33–34). Since we cannot obtain this fulness of joy without the physical element, that element is not evil. It is the carnal, untamed desires of the natural man that bring evil.

King Benjamin stated that “the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam” (Mosiah 3:19). Because the Fall introduced good and evil into the world, we are able to exercise free agency in partaking of either good or evil (Mosiah 16:3). Recognizing this fact, the Lord explained to Adam, “Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good. And it is given unto them to know good from evil; wherefore they are agents unto themselves” (Moses 6:55–56). The Pearl of Great Price teaches that after the Fall some of Adam and Eve’s children did indeed “[love] Satan more than God. And men began from that time forth to be carnal, sensual, and devilish” (Moses 5:13).

If the natural man continually yields to worldly enticings, he will continually be an enemy to God. As already indicated, we are all conceived in sin, and, therefore, as we grow up, sin is conceived in our hearts (Moses 6:55). From this we learn that the natural man is partially centered in the heart. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul states that humanity fulfills “the desires of the flesh and of the mind” (2:2–3), thereby indicating that the natural man is also closely associated with the mind. In truth, the heart and mind are in all probability the real seat of the natural man. Do not the scriptures testify that “as [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov 23:7)?

If we do not “put off” the natural man, we become “carnal, sensual, and devilish, by nature” (Alma 42:10). Alma taught that “all men that are in a state of nature . . . are in the gall of bitterness, . . . [and are] contrary to the nature of God” (Alma 41:11; see also Hel 13:38). Those who remain in a natural or carnal state degenerate until they reach a state called the “fulness of iniquity” (Ether 2:10) and consequently suffer final



captivity by the devil. It was this thought that caused Lehi to exhort Laman and Lemuel to choose righteousness and its resulting liberty, rather than choose evil with its resulting captivity. He pleaded with his sons “not [to] choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in his own kingdom” (2 Nephi 2:29). Abinadi spoke to the wicked priests of king Noah and warned them of their own “carnal and devilish” nature (Mosiah 16:3). He then warned the priests of the consequences of having a carnal nature: “Remember that he that persists in his own carnal nature, and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion against God, remaineth in his fallen state and the devil hath all power over him. Therefore he is as though there was no redemption made, being an enemy to God; and also is the devil an enemy to God” (Mosiah 16:5).

A few illustrations will give us insight into the natural man. Many people do not perceive the beginnings of a carnal nature. Almost any action which is rationalized by the phrase, “Oh, that’s natural,” will find its true source in the natural man. If a novel or a movie portrays a suggestive scene, is it not the natural reaction to dwell on it and feed the lust? If one person has more material possessions than another, is it not natural for one to be proud and the other envious? When one is injured by another, is it not the natural reaction to seek revenge? Illustrations could be given of anger, sloth, gluttony, violence, selfishness, profanity, and other natural behavior. Even the Lord warns men who hold the priesthood that it is “the nature of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, . . . to exercise unrighteous dominion” (D&C 121:39).

We often personify our natures as entities which are separate from ourselves. “It’s not my nature to be patient.” We say, “I naturally tend to fly off the handle at times,” or, “I’m overly aggressive by nature.” We cannot justify these statements; our goal is not to maintain our own carnal nature. It is the Savior’s nature the Book of Mormon prophets declare all must seek.



King Benjamin states that if one “yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit,” one will be able to “[put] off the natural man and [become] a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord.” He then defines a saint as someone who is “submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:19).

Through the Holy Spirit we can develop the qualities of a saint. Paul taught the Galatians to “walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other” (5:16–17). Through the Spirit, we must seek to conform our natures to the Savior’s nature. This requires us to experience a mighty change, a spiritual rebirth (Alma 5:14).

## Becoming Born Again

The scriptures call the process of relinquishing the natural man and becoming a saint being “born again.” The Christian world discusses this doctrine at length, leading many to believe that salvation comes through the simple acceptance of Christ as one’s personal Savior without requiring much effort on the part of the believer. However, the teachings of Benjamin, Abinadi, and Alma in the Book of Mormon reveal that the process requires more than accepting Christ.

### *Experiencing a “Mighty Change”*

Being born again involves both death and birth; it is a transition or a “mighty change” (Mosiah 5:2). To be born again implies the death of the natural man, which is a figurative death that occurs in the heart. Remember, the Lord told Adam that people conceive sin in their hearts while they are yet children (Moses 6:55). The Atonement plays a key role in changing a person’s heart; it is the love of the Savior, faith in his



atonement, and hope in his merciful forgiveness that provide the power and motivation to change.

At the end of his address, Benjamin asked his people if they believed his words. Their reply is one of the best descriptions of the process of spiritual rebirth in all scripture:

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 5:2)

Born again persons have experienced this mighty change of heart. They do not desire or glory in evil, but glory in good. They are eager to listen to the voice of the Spirit, the Light of Christ, the prophets, and the scriptures, rather than to hold to the inclinations of the natural man. Lust, greed, selfishness, and anger may continue to tempt them, but they will seek to control those feelings and thoughts by bending their wills to the will of the Savior. This “mighty change” will be evidenced by a “broken heart and a contrite spirit,” which betoken humility, not pride, in being “saved.”

A broken heart is not just a sad or mournful heart; it is a submissive one. Just as “broken” horses follow the slightest commands of their master, so too are spiritually reborn individuals “willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [them]” (Mosiah 3:19). Christ provided the supreme example of submitting to the will of the Father. As Christ atoned for the sins of the world he pleaded, “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me,” but said, “Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt 26:39). To bring the Atonement to pass, even the Savior humbly submitted to his Father.

Whenever the Book of Mormon speaks of being born again, the heart is the center of the altered state. A few examples may help illustrate this truth. The converted Lamanites “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). Alma the Younger spoke often of these truths, which he learned by his own experience, as related in Mosiah 27 and Alma 36. He reminded the people of Zarahemla of his father's experience after he listened to Abinadi: "There was a mighty change wrought in his heart. . . . He preached the word unto your fathers, and a mighty change was also wrought in their hearts, and they humbled themselves. . . . They were faithful until the end; therefore they were saved." He then asked the crucial question: "And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?" (Alma 5:11-14).

It is important to realize that not all people undergo as mighty a change of heart as did king Benjamin's subjects, the converted Lamanites, and Alma the Younger. In fact, most do not. Degrees of change vary because people vary in degrees of iniquity. Some need more change than others. Obviously there would be a difference between one who has lived a proper life based on the light he or she had received and one who has given in totally to carnal tendencies. Both must be born again, but the change will necessarily be different.

### *Obtaining Forgiveness of Sins*

After king Benjamin explained the atonement of Christ to his people, they were overcome by the Spirit. They were not a sinful or rebellious people; they had "been a diligent people in keeping the commandments of the Lord" (Mosiah 1:11). Yet, after hearing of the natural man and the Atonement they "viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth." They prayed for the cleansing mercy of the Atonement that they might "receive forgiveness of [their] sins, and have [their] hearts . . . purified." Their prayers were answered and they were "filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience,



because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ” (Mosiah 4:2–3).

Many truths emerge from these two verses. First, even “diligent people” need to recognize “their own carnal state.” This is not so much a recognition of specific sinful acts as of a sinfulness that results from the desires of one’s heart. We begin to realize that the specific sin of snapping at a spouse or child is really the result of impatience; arguing with a neighbor is the result of pride or anger; adultery or fornication is the result of lust. We begin, through the Light of Christ, to see the roots of sin. As long as we concentrate on the outward acts and not on the heart, we will never be truly born again. As Lamoni’s father prayed, so must all pray and ask, “What shall I do that I may be born of God, having this wicked spirit rooted out of my breast, and receive his Spirit?” (Alma 22:15).

We learn another truth from Benjamin’s people. When they recognized their sinfulness they asked for Christ to apply his atoning blood in their behalf, that they might receive forgiveness of their sins, and that their hearts might be purified. They asked for this purification because of their faith in Christ. This is one of the finest examples in scripture of the practical results of having faith in the Savior’s atonement. That faith will lead us to seek the death of the natural man through purification of the heart. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the only power equal to the task of overcoming the natural man.

Benjamin’s people immediately received the joy and “peace of conscience” that comes with a remission of sins. Mormon reminds his readers that this miracle was wrought because of the people’s “exceeding faith . . . in Jesus Christ” (Mosiah 4:3).

### *Receiving the Image of Christ*

Alma adds an important truth relative to the process of spiritual rebirth. The death of the natural man is but the beginning. We must then receive “[Christ’s] image in [our]



countenances” (Alma 5:14). Remember, Benjamin’s counsel was not only to put off the natural man; a saint had to be born. Saints have the image of Christ engraved on their countenances as a result of their acceptance of the Atonement and their subsequent lives of obedience and righteousness. As they continue to refine their characters in accordance with the Savior’s character, they reflect his image more and more. Alma revealed this truth the moment he awoke from his three-day sojourn in hell: “I have repented of my sins,” he told the people who prayed for his recovery, “and have been redeemed of the Lord; behold I am born of the Spirit” (Mosiah 27:24). Alma testified that his experience must be applied to all people:

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 27:25–26)

Alma calls the spiritually reborn person a “new creature” (v 26), a “son” or “daughter” of God (v 25). The father of this son or daughter is Jesus Christ. No father wants his children to remain infants forever; a father wants his children to progress, grow, and improve in every worthy way. Christ is a righteous, perfect father. He desires his children to progress and become like him. To do so they must follow his example and acquire all the traits and qualities he possesses, just as he followed the Father and attained his qualities and perfection by growing from grace to grace. These reborn sons and daughters of Christ, having entered into a state of grace through the Atonement, then progress from grace to grace until they have reached perfection, or to use Paul’s words, until they reach a “knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). This progression brings the fruit of the tree of life which the Book of Mormon describes as white, sweet, desirable, precious, beautiful, pure, and most joyous to the soul (see 1 Nephi 8:11–12;



11:8–9, 22–23; Alma 32:42). To know this fruit by our own experience is the whole purpose of mortality.

*The Process of Being Born Again: Alma the Younger*

The process of being born again and becoming a son or daughter of Christ is dramatically portrayed in the life of Alma the Younger. Before the Atonement wrought a mighty change in him, he was a “very wicked and an idolatrous man” (Mosiah 27:8). He used his power of speech to lead people away from God into all manner of iniquities. He caused “much dissension” and gave “the enemy of God . . . power over” the people (Mosiah 27:9). He sought to “destroy the church of God” (Mosiah 27:10). He rebelled against God until the appearance of an angel helped him to see his sinful life. While speaking of this experience in later years to his son Helaman, Alma described the agonies of a damned soul: “The very thought of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror. Oh, thought I, that I could be banished and become extinct both soul and body, that I might not be brought to stand in the presence of my God, to be judged of my deeds” (Alma 36:14–15).

He described the pain and bitterness as he was “harrowed up to the greatest degree . . . with all [his] sins” (Alma 36:12). In the midst of this agony he cried within his heart, “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me” (Alma 36:18). In the moment of his plea, the power of the Atonement took hold of Alma, and he was born again. The mighty change took place. It was a change that had immediate and long-term effects:

I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more. 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 36:19–21)



Before the mercy of the Atonement was extended, the thought of coming before God filled Alma with horror. After the change Alma “saw . . . God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and [his] soul did long to be there” (Alma 36:22). Before his acceptance of the Savior, Alma fought the Church; afterwards, he sought to build it up. Before, he was filled with wickedness and iniquity; afterwards, his life was patterned according to the Savior’s perfect example. Before, he rebelled; afterwards, he obeyed. In every aspect of his life Alma was a new creature. This is the power of the Atonement and the result of being born again. As he awoke, Alma invited all to experience this healing change. He testified that Christ “remembereth every creature of his creating, he will make himself manifest unto all” (Mosiah 27:30).

### The Fruits of Spiritual Rebirth

We have discussed several aspects of spiritual rebirth and how it relates to the natural man and to the Atonement. The Book of Mormon also provides an excellent description of the born again individual. That description can be gleaned from many scriptures (see Col 3:9–10, 12, 14; Alma 5:14–31), but Mosiah 4 and 5 provide an ideal example. Mosiah 4 shows us that in detailing these traits we must remember that they are characteristics which the spiritually reborn individual seeks to acquire; they do not appear in their fullest expression at the moment of change. According to Benjamin, if we “have come to the knowledge of the glory of God, . . . have known of his goodness and have tasted of his love, . . . have received a remission of [our] sins,” and if we remember him, and remain humble and steadfast in our faith, we will (1) “always rejoice”; (2) “be filled with the love of God”; (3) “retain a remission of [our] sins”; (4) grow in the knowledge of God and of that which is “just and true”; (5) “not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably”; (6) “render to every man according to



that which is his due”; (7) teach our children “to walk in the ways of truth and soberness, . . . [and] to love one another, and to serve one another”; and (8) “succor those that stand in need of [our] succor . . . [and] administer of [our] substance unto him that standeth in need” (Mosiah 4:11–16). So that his people would not be discouraged or overly guilt-ridden by such a high ideal, Benjamin counseled them to “see that all these things are done in wisdom and order, for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength” (Mosiah 4:27).

Mosiah 5 expounds upon the qualities of people who have been spiritually reborn. Through “the manifestations of [the] Spirit,” these born again individuals have “great views of that which is to come; and were it expedient, [they] could prophesy of all things” (Mosiah 5:3). The Prophet Joseph Smith alluded to this “great view” when he taught that “we must have a change of heart to see the kingdom of God” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 328). Born again people are “willing to enter into a covenant with God . . . to be obedient to his commandments in all things . . . all the remainder of [their] days” (Mosiah 5:5). They are willing to “take upon [themselves] the name of Christ” because they are now his children, “his sons and daughters” (Mosiah 5:7–8). They will keep Christ’s name “written always in [their] hearts” (Mosiah 5:12). To do that, the Savior must be close to “the thoughts and intents of [their] hearts” (Mosiah 5:13). Lastly, they will be “steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works” (Mosiah 5:15).

Often people wonder if they have been born again. If they have a desire to do good, are willing to covenant with the Lord to be obedient, are trying to refine their characters in the image of Christ by constantly thinking of him and doing the works he did, they can feel secure that they truly have been born again. However, it will be a long time before they progress to the full measure of Christ, the father who leads them into eternal life.



## Baptism—The Covenant of Rebirth

The ordinance that symbolizes the mighty change of heart or spiritual rebirth is baptism. The old natural man of sin is buried in the water. The new son or daughter of Christ is resurrected from that burial. Old sins are washed away, and the new son or daughter is clothed with the Holy Ghost.

Through baptism certain covenants are made which, if honored, will lead the new son or daughter to a fulness of light and truth. These covenants are renewed each time we partake of the sacrament, which symbolizes our continual recommitment to the mighty change and the development of Christlike qualities by our (1) taking upon ourselves the name of Christ, (2) remembering him, and (3) keeping his commandments. These covenants parallel the baptismal covenants.

As we have seen, king Benjamin's people were "willing to enter into a covenant with . . . God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things . . . all the remainder of [their] days" (Mosiah 5:5). They were also willing to "be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters," and to "take upon [themselves] the name of Christ" (Mosiah 5:7–8). Benjamin then exhorted them to "remember to retain the name written always in your hearts, 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. For how knoweth a man the master whom he has not served, and who is a stranger unto him, and is far from the thoughts and intents of his heart?" (Mosiah 5:12–13). Benjamin's people entered into all three sacramental covenants.

We keep the commandments of God because they will help us develop a Christlike character. We remember the Atonement because it helps us maintain the humility and broken heart necessary to retain a remission of sins. We remember the Savior because his life is the perfect example all must follow to become like the Father and attain exaltation. A



constant recommitment to take on the name of Christ is a necessary reminder that one has covenanted to become like him. Spiritually newborn sons and daughters of Christ promise to walk in their father's footsteps.

Many people have been given names of righteous people from scriptures or righteous ancestors. Often parents name their children after righteous people in the hope and expectation that they will grow up to be like their namesake. In a simple manner this is part of the power behind taking the name of Christ. Through baptism, we promise to become like Jesus Christ, whose name we now bear.

## Conclusion

The doctrine of Christ is simple. We need not be great scholars of the scriptures to understand it; it was never intended to be difficult or mysterious. Having faith in Christ brings the fulness of light and truth which leads to a mighty change of heart and to spiritual rebirth. This change destroys the natural man and creates a newborn son or daughter of Christ. Through constant faith and repentance, and through keeping and renewing the covenants made at baptism, we become worthy of the companionship of the Holy Ghost, who, as a being of light and truth, refines, purifies, and sanctifies us by teaching us truth and by showing us "all things" necessary for exaltation (see 2 Nephi 32:5). Thus we grow from grace to grace. If we lovingly and diligently try to obey every principle, law, commandment, and counsel of God, we will receive the fulness of God's glory. Benjamin promised his people, if they were

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. (Mosiah 5:15)



Abinadi gave the same assuring promise that those with faith in Christ “are raised to dwell with God who has redeemed them” (Mosiah 15:23). Alma the Younger bore his testimony that he knew Christ would “raise [him] up at the last day to dwell with him in glory” (Alma 36:28). Spiritual rebirth is not the equivalent of exaltation, but it does place the individual on the path to eternal life. The sealing of an individual to eternal life comes later, but without these first steps salvation cannot come. Through these simple principles, gods are developed, and individuals walk a pathway opposite to that of the natural man.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith.* Comp. Joseph Fielding Smith. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976.