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Blind Eyes and Hard Hearts: Apostasy in the Book of Mormon

MICHAEL J. FEAR

Since the beginning of time, men acquainted with God have sometimes apostatized from the truth. Lucifer, one who stood “in authority in the presence of God” (D&C 76:25), rebelled and was cast out of heaven. Cain, a son of Adam and Eve who held the priesthood and spoke with God, likewise questioned, “Who is the Lord that I should know him?” (Moses 5:16) before killing his brother. How could those so intimately acquainted with God turn and fight against His kingdom? The Book of Mormon offers insights into this phenomenon and provides illustrations of apostasy. It testifies that Satan blinds the eyes and hardens the hearts of men to lead them from God. It also shows how to combat these temptations and maintain a soft heart and clear vision.

Lehi had a dream of a strait and narrow path that led to a tree. Covering the path was an “exceedingly great mist of darkness” that caused those traveling the path to “lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost” (1 Nephi 8:23). An angel taught Nephi that the mists represented “the temptations of the devil, which blindeth the eyes, and hardeneth the hearts of the children of men” (1 Nephi 12:17). This imagery is a key to understanding how Satan works to lead people from the things of God. He seeks to confuse them and corrupt their feelings, that he may drag them down to hell.

To the ancient Hebrews, the head represented the premortal spirit, and the heart represented mortal life.¹ With this understanding it is apparent that the devil works on both the mortal and immortal parts of human beings as he seeks to destroy their souls. If the spirit is strong, he will attack the heart or the flesh. If the heart is strong,

he attacks the eyes or the spirit. Because of this dual attack, the Savior counseled the Nephites, “Ye must watch and pray always lest ye enter into temptation” (3 Nephi 18:18). The awareness encouraged by the Savior meets the need of protection against blindness through watching and against hardness through prayer. Those who fall away from the truth are overcome in one or both of these areas and have failed to follow the Savior’s admonition.

APOSTASY IN THE FAMILY OF LEHI

The first apostasy in the Book of Mormon is in the family of Lehi, where Satan influenced the two eldest sons, Laman and Lemuel. Despite repeated witnesses of God’s power, Laman and Lemuel continually rebelled against their father and their younger brother Nephi. When Lehi shared with his sons the commandment of the Lord to go and get the plates, Laman and Lemuel murmured, calling it “a hard thing” (1 Nephi 3:5). Although complaining is not a major sin, it revealed hard hearts and eyes that could not see. To their credit, Laman and Lemuel returned to Jerusalem and sought the record.

After losing all their wealth in two unsuccessful attempts to get the plates from Laban, Laman and Lemuel began to smite Sam and Nephi with a rod. An angel appeared and sternly rebuked these elder brethren. He commanded them to return to Jerusalem and promised that “the Lord [would] deliver Laban into [their] hands” (1 Nephi 3:29). Such an experience would convince many to be obedient to the Lord, but not Laman and Lemuel. They were “so hard in [their] hearts, and so blind in [their] minds” (1 Nephi 7:8) that they “could not feel his words” (1 Nephi 17:45). Immediately after the angel departed, Nephi records that they “again began to murmur, saying: How is it possible that the Lord will deliver Laban into our hands? Behold, he is a mighty man, and he can command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty; then why not us?” (1 Nephi 3:31). Blinded by the earthly power of Laban’s troops, they could not see, as Nephi did, that the Lord “is mightier than all the earth, then why not mightier than Laban and his fifty, yea or even than his tens of

thousands?” (1 Nephi 4:1). In their blindness they followed Nephi “until . . . the walls of Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 4:4)—but no further. Those who are blinded often follow God to a point but lack the faith to take a step into the darkness.

Shortly before his death, Lehi counseled his rebellious sons to “come forth out of obscurity” (2 Nephi 1:23). He was challenging his sons to come out of the self-imposed darkness of their sinful state. This father’s counsel has greater meaning when viewed in light of latter-day revelation. The Lord taught the Prophet Joseph Smith that the “wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth, through disobedience, from the children of men” (D&C 93:39). With this insight into Satan’s operations, we see that Laman and Lemuel, because they yielded to the temptations of the devil, lost the illumination necessary to see clearly. As they began to grow blind, they struggled to make right choices, and with each subsequent mistake they lost more light and their vision worsened. This pattern is typical of all who yield themselves to sin and refuse to repent.

APOSTASY OF SHEREM

Another example of apostasy is found in the seventh chapter of Jacob. Sherem came among the people and taught against Christ. He “preached many things which were flattering,” Jacob recorded, “that he might lead away the hearts of the people” (Jacob 7:2–3). This flattery is one tactic that Nephi prophesied the devil would use in the course of his temptations (see 2 Nephi 28:22). Although Sherem was successful with many Nephites, he mistakenly challenged Jacob—one who had “seen” many things of God, including angels (see Jacob 7:5). Because Jacob had clear vision he saw through the deception of blind Sherem. Jacob testified that “the Lord God poured in his Spirit into my soul” (Jacob 7:8), and as a result he was able to confound Sherem’s false teachings. The Spirit, Jacob taught, “speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13) and therefore helps men see clearly. In contrast to Satan’s ways of blindness, the Holy Ghost enlightens the mind and shows the way for men in this darkened world.

Ironically, after Sherem was struck down, he “spake plainly” (Jacob 7:18) to those he had once flattered. Sometimes the Lord brings tragedy upon men in order to soften hearts and help them to see clearly.

APOSTASY OF KING NOAH

King Noah also had blind eyes and a hard heart. The cause of his spiritual disability is summed up in the second verse of the account of his reign. “He did not keep the commandments of God, but he did walk after the desires of his own heart” (Mosiah 11:2). This willful disobedience to God’s laws took the light from his eyes. His heart was further corrupted as “he placed his heart upon his riches” and “spent his time in riotous living with his wives and his concubines” (Mosiah 11:14). His priests also became visually impaired through similar sinful activity. These men spent “their time with harlots” (Mosiah 11:14). Such a serious sin was sure to drive the Spirit of the Lord from these priests, causing them to “speak lying and vain words to [the] people” (Mosiah 11:11).

Just as a foul odor follows the rotting of a carcass, the people of Noah began to follow their leaders’ sinful example. “They also became idolatrous, because they were deceived by the vain and flattering words of the king and priests” (Mosiah 11:7). Their spiritual decay is vividly portrayed in the description of their victory over the Lamanites—the Nephites boast that “their fifty could stand against thousands of the Lamanites” (Mosiah 11:19). A delusion of this magnitude could only be explained by having their eyes blinded by the adversary. They also “did delight in blood, and the shedding of the blood of their brethren” (Mosiah 11:19), further evidencing the hardened condition of their hearts. Although some of the people repented, their hardness drove them to kill a prophet of God and eventually led them into bondage and death. This pattern demonstrates the end for all those who reject the truth and continue in their blind and hardened condition.

APOSTASY IN YOUTH

The Book of Mormon teaches that youth are also susceptible to blindness. Mosiah shared an account of “the rising generation” who were blinded in such a way that they “could not understand” the words that were spoken by their parents and church leaders (Mosiah 26:1). This inability to comprehend the gospel was caused by their unbelief and led them to a hardness of heart (see Mosiah 26:3). Because of their hardness, they indulged in sin that clouded their vision. In their blindness, they led others to sin by their flattering words. Not only were they lost in sin, but they utterly refused to change. Their hearts were sufficiently hard that they would not repent, and therefore “their names were blotted out” (Mosiah 26:36). The progression from unbelief, to blindness, to hardness of heart is common in life. Sadly, Satan is succeeding with many youth today who lack the faith to believe and therefore are led to a hardened and darkened condition.

APOSTASY OF KORIHOR

Alma deals with the anti-Christ Korihor. The record of their confrontation shows the progression with which Satan leads hearts away from Christ. Ironically, Korihor condemned the church members for their inability to see clearly. This man, who later confessed that Satan had blinded him (see Alma 30:53), accused the church leaders of doing that very thing to their parishioners. He mocked the members who “look forward [to] . . . see a remission of [their] sins” (Alma 30:16), yet he could not see the contradictions in his own teachings. He admitted that the “devil . . . appeared unto me in the form of an angel, and said unto me: Go and reclaim this people, for they have all gone astray after an unknown God. And he said unto me: There is no God” (Alma 30:53). To hear such a blatant contradiction from an angel and then teach it to others testifies of the blindness under which Korihor labored.

Korihor was blinded by adultery. “He did preach unto them, leading away the hearts of many, causing them to lift up their heads in their wickedness, yea, leading away many women, and also men,

to commit whoredoms” (Alma 30:18). Korihor apparently taught whoredoms by example, hence the specific mention of women that he led away. His appetite for immorality ensured that his heart would remain hardened, even in the face of overwhelming evidence. After Alma dismantled the entire anti-Christ doctrine, Korihor asked for a sign to prove the existence of God. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “Whenever you see a man seeking after a sign, you may set it down that he is an adulterous man.”² Because he persisted in his wickedness and blindness, Korihor refused to accept the truth of God’s existence, despite the testimony of Alma, the prophets, the scriptures, the earth, and the heavens (see Alma 30:44–46). His willful blindness and hard heart brought a curse upon him and led to a tragic end (see Alma 30:50–59). Mormon draws the conclusion that “the devil will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell” (Alma 30:60), blind eyes, hard hearts, and all.

THE APOSTASY OF AMALICKIAH

Of all the apostates in the Book of Mormon, perhaps none is craftier than Amalickiah. As Helaman and his brethren were setting the church in order, they changed some of the leadership. A group from within the church, led by Amalickiah, rose up and refused to accept the changes (see Alma 45:23). “He was a man of cunning device and a man of many flattering words, that he led away the hearts of many people to do wickedly” (Alma 46:10). He played upon the ambitions of his fellow apostates, many of them being “lower judges . . . seeking for power” (Alma 46:4), promising them authority if they would make him king. Satan uses similar tactics, preying on weaknesses of the flesh such as pride, power, wealth, or carnal appetites in an effort to harden hearts. Amalickiah’s attack on the hearts of his followers, however, was not a complete victory. Many of them became “doubtful concerning the justice of the cause” (Alma 46:29) when Moroni’s army marched against them. Amalickiah, in a satanic gesture, escaped to freedom and left his people to face the Nephite army alone.

After making his escape to the Lamanite lands, Amalickiah continued his quest to become king. He deceived and murdered in order to sit upon the throne of the Lamanites (see Alma 47). Immediately upon becoming king, he began to blind the eyes and harden the hearts of his subjects. He “did appoint men to speak unto the Lamanites from their towers” that successfully “hardened the hearts of the Lamanites and blinded their minds, and stirred them up to anger” (Alma 48:1, 3) against the Nephites. These words echo the prophecy of Nephi that Satan would “rage in the hearts of the children of men, and stir them up to anger against that which is good” (2 Nephi 28:20). Such misguided anger is another evidence of the blindness that Satan so effectively perpetrates upon those who yield to him.

APOSTASY OF THE JAREDITES

The Jaredites were likewise destroyed because of blind eyes and hard hearts. After millions of their people perished in a civil war, “Coriantumr wrote again an epistle unto Shiz, desiring that he would not come again to battle, but that he would take the kingdom, and spare the lives of the people” (Ether 15:18). Such a suggestion sounds reasonable, but Shiz was so hardened that he rejected the offer of peace and proceeded forward to the destruction of himself and the entire nation. Ether shared an insight into the Jaredite’s condition when he said, “the Spirit of the Lord had ceased striving with them, and Satan had full power over the hearts of the people; for they were given up unto the hardness of their hearts, and the blindness of their minds that they might be destroyed” (Ether 15:19).

APOSTASY OF THE NEPHITES

Unfortunately, the Nephite nation was in a similar situation prior to its destruction. The Nephites’ hardness of heart and blindness of mind were recounted by Mormon to his son Moroni in chilling clarity: “Many of the daughters of the Lamanites have they taken prisoners; and after depriving them of . . . virtue . . . they did murder them in a most cruel manner, torturing their bodies even

unto death; and after they have done this, they devour their flesh like unto wild beasts, because of the hardness of their hearts; and they do it for a token of bravery” (Moroni 9:9–10). Such brutality and perversion are clearly the actions of people who cannot see. These inhumane acts are not the tendency of civilized people, yet in their blindness the Nephites equated them with bravery. These actions bespeak their being “lost . . . wandering in strange roads” (1 Nephi 8:32) as Lehi had seen in vision. Those who had lost themselves were fit only for destruction, which came swiftly to this depraved nation.

EXAMPLES OF FAITH

The Lord not only uses blind and hardened individuals as examples in the Book of Mormon but also shows the opposite course of action. In contrast to Amalickiah, Captain Moroni saw clearly. Mormon testified that “he was a man of perfect understanding” (Alma 48:11). These words denote a clear vision and an ability to see things the way they really are. His heart did likewise “swell with thanksgiving to his God” (Alma 48:12). This gratitude kept Moroni’s heart soft and his “soul did joy in the liberty and the freedom of his country, and his brethren” (Alma 48:11). The Lord uses such polar illustrations to teach the difference between right and wrong. Amalickiah is destroyed in the war while Moroni is preserved, showing the opposite ends of blindness and clear vision to those who are willing to yield “their hearts unto God” (Helaman 3:35).

The Savior taught the Nephites how to avoid falling into these deceptions of Satan. His counsel to “watch and pray” (3 Nephi 18:18) is a fundamental principle for those wishing to avoid apostasy. Watching involves being aware of temptation and one’s own weakness. The Lord invites men to follow the living prophets and study the scriptures. In Lehi’s dream, the only ones who made it through the mist were “clinging to the rod of iron” (1 Nephi 8:24). Nephi later taught that the iron rod “was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and

the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction” (1 Nephi 15:24). Such a promise brings comfort to the faithful, for they need not be blinded or deceived if they will continue to hearken to the words of Christ and follow His servants.

Nephi showed how to have a soft heart after he heard the words of his father. “I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father; wherefore, I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers” (1 Nephi 2:16). Nephi demonstrated the efficacy of prayer and the Lord’s ability to change his heart.

Alma counseled his son Helaman to “let the affections of thy heart be placed upon the Lord forever . . . and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God” (Alma 37:36–37). This call to gratitude is also a call to maintain a soft heart. Alma asks several questions of the church in Zarahemla, including, “Have you sufficiently retained in remembrance [God’s] mercy and long-suffering?” (Alma 5:6) and “Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?” (Alma 5:14). The Book of Mormon teaches much about the heart and the need for it to change. Such a change of heart is a change of nature that all men and women must experience if they are to see their way back to God clearly. “All mankind, yea, men and women . . . 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). Without this change, the heart remains in its natural state—“an enemy to God” (Mosiah 3:19), subject to the influence of the devil.

CONCLUSION

The Book of Mormon plainly teaches the tactics of the adversary to blind the eyes and harden the hearts of men, reveals weaknesses of the flesh that Satan uses to get to the eyes and the heart,

and shows the end of those who persist in their blindness and hardened condition. Their destruction is assured, a pattern illustrated several times throughout the book. The Lord does not leave His disciples without hope, however, for the record also offers solutions and antidotes for avoiding personal apostasy. Jesus teaches to watch and pray, to be grateful, and to repent regularly. Such spiritual exercise keeps the Spirit alive and well and allows help from the heavens. Most important of all, the Lord gives His words through living prophets and the scriptures. These words will “divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked—and land their souls . . . at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven . . . to go no more out” (Helaman 3:29–30). If men will hold to these words, they will have clear vision and changed hearts, despite all the efforts of earth and hell. This is the testimony of the Book of Mormon.

NOTES

1. Lee Donaldson, lecture to the Religion 500 class at Brigham Young University, 29 July 2002, author’s personal notes.

2. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 157.