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Source: *The Book of Mormon: Fourth Nephi Through Moroni, From Zion to Destruction*

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

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 1995

Page(s): 251-262



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“Weak Things Made Strong”

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Carolyn J. Rasmus

And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them. (Ether 12:27)

I was familiar with this frequently-quoted scripture, and it had meaning to me before I joined the Church 22 years ago. The 58 words which comprise this verse are powerful and instructive; however, this verse becomes increasingly meaningful when we examine the context in which the Lord gave this instruction to Moroni, analyze other scriptures related to it, and apply the principles taught by the Lord in our own lives.

The Context

The instruction given by the Lord in Ether 12:27 comes midway through Moroni’s abridgment of the record of the Jaredites. Taken from the 24 plates found by the people of Limhi during the reign of king Mosiah, this record is now known as the book of Ether (Ether 1:2). Chapter 12 begins with an account of Ether’s prophecies in the days of Coriantumr (v 2). Ether prophesied “great and marvelous things” (v 5), telling the people that “by faith all things are fulfilled” (v 3) and that “whoso believeth in God might with surety hope for a better world, yea, even a place at the right hand of God, which hope cometh of faith, maketh an anchor to the souls of men, which would

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make them sure and steadfast" (Ether 12:4). It is obvious that we do not have all of the words of Ether since Moroni noted that he could not write even a "hundredth part" of Ether's record (15:33).

Ether's testimony of the power of faith must have touched the spirit of Moroni, for he interrupts his account of Ether's teachings to insert his own thoughts: "And now, I, Moroni . . . show unto the world that faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because you see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith" (Ether 12:6). Like Paul in his letter to the Hebrews, Moroni recounts the power of faith made manifest in the lives of individuals (vv 7–19). He then returns to a theme he discussed earlier: God is a God of miracles (Mormon 9:10–11) and if miracles cease among the children of men it is "because that they dwindle in unbelief" (v 20). Moroni emphasizes that miracles are wrought after faith; faith in the Son of God is always a requisite (Ether 12:17).

After recounting the great faith of the brother of Jared which faith enabled him to see the finger of God (Ether 12:20), Moroni appears to feel that his own attempts to communicate his belief in the power of faith to those who will someday read his record may be inadequate. He says, "Lord, the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing; for Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, but thou hast not made us mighty in writing" (v 23). Perhaps Moroni sees his own inadequacies and wonders how it is possible for him to accomplish his work or how he can represent the power of faith through the written word. He refers to the "awkwardness of our hands" and says, "When we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words" (vv 24–25).

We see in Moroni what we often see in ourselves when our faith falters or when we feel incapable of accomplishing what lies before us. First, we love to absolve ourselves of any responsibility and blame others for our problems. Moroni seems to do this when he says to the Lord, "*Thou* hast made us that we could write but little" (Ether 12:24; emphasis added). Can you hear yourself in a calling or situation for which you feel unprepared? How often do we lament, "You got me into this. I never thought I could do this job?" Second, Moroni compares himself to the brother of Jared whose writings were "mighty even as [the Lord], unto the overpowering of man to read them" (v 24). Third, he fears others might ridicule or treat his work with

contempt: “I fear lest the Gentiles shall mock at our words” (Ether 12:25). And so we see in Moroni what is so common in ourselves: a tendency to blame others for our feelings of inadequacy, compare ourselves to others who appear to have talents we do not, and fear what others will think of our work as opposed to what God will think.

Considering Moroni’s prideful attitude, the Lord’s response is not surprising. He teaches that he “give[s] unto men weakness that they may be humble” (Ether 12:27), and then, as if to make sure the point is well made, he repeats the word *humble* two more times in the same sentence. Both times it is used as a verb, suggesting action on our part. No doubt this was not the help Moroni sought. Instead of giving him an answer to specific concerns, God teaches him a principle far greater than if he had simply made him mighty in writing.

Humility

Humility has not always been my favorite topic. For many years I wanted to be the best, satisfy my own selfish ambitions, be in control, and think of myself before others. Elder Neal A. Maxwell’s statement that humility and meekness rank “low on the mortal scale of things” (ix) described my attitude.

My awakening awareness of the necessity for developing humility came during general conference in April 1986. President Ezra Taft Benson taught that “pride is a ‘my will’ rather than ‘thy will’ approach to life. . . . Pride is characterized by ‘What do I want out of life?’ rather than by ‘What would God have me do with my life?’ It is self-will as opposed to God’s will. It is the fear of man over fear of God. The opposite of pride is humbleness, meekness, submissiveness, teachableness” (“Cleansing the Inner Vessel” 6–7). Three years later in his April 1989 conference address, President Benson taught that “pride is the great stumbling block to Zion” (“Beware of Pride” 7). He had already noted that “God will have a humble people. Either we can choose to be humble or we can be compelled to be humble,” and that “the antidote for pride is humility—meekness, submissiveness” (6).

As meaningful as President Benson’s messages were to me, my real learning and understanding came by personal experience. In May 1990, I had been asked to accompany Young Women General President Ardeth G. Kapp to the Philippines to assist in presenting firesides

and leadership training to young women and their leaders. When I received the plane ticket and noted the cost, I began to wonder what I could teach or do that would justify such a large expenditure of money. In the weeks before our departure, I studied about the history of the Church in the Philippines, met with people who had served there, and tried to prepare myself in every way. The night before we were to depart, my home teacher gave me a blessing. Afterwards I wrote down as much as I could remember of the blessing to keep it in my mind. Among the things I recalled and recorded was this statement, "As you ask in faith, your prayers will be answered."

The next morning as I awakened early, a hymn tune kept running through my mind, but I was unable to put words with it. Finally, I got up and began leafing through the hymnbook. Soon I was reading the words to the tune: "Be thou humble in thy weakness, and the Lord thy God shall lead thee, Shall lead thee by the hand and give thee answer to thy prayers" (*Hymns* #130). I felt as if the Lord were giving me a personal message in preparation for my travels.

Within 22 hours I arrived in the Philippines. Never have I felt more dependent on the Lord. The schedule was rigorous and demanding, the weather was hot and humid, and I was not prepared for the impoverished conditions in which we found people living. Often I had great difficulty understanding what people were saying to me because they would mix the dialect of Tagalog with English. When I worked with youth, I found myself praying constantly that I could understand what they were saying. And I did.

Toward the end of this assignment, I awoke early one morning and felt impressed to record in my journal what I described as a "significant experience":

I've been awake for about an hour, reviewing in my mind all we have seen and experienced and learned. There is so much more than can ever be expressed. Then I knelt down to pray. I've prayed daily that I might see these people as Christ sees them; that I would be filled with the pure love of Christ as I interact with them, but this morning I found myself also praying that I'd *feel* toward them as the Savior felt. Almost immediately I was overcome by the Spirit and began weeping. I thought of the time described in 3 Nephi when Christ visited the Nephites and taught the people and prayed for them. He told them they were blessed because of their faith and that his joy was full. Then it is recorded, "He wept, . . . and he took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them. And . . . he wept again." (3 Nephi 17:21-22)

For an instant I felt like I think Christ must have felt toward his lambs and I wondered if I had done enough. I thought of the great joy in the eyes of these people, of their humility, their teachability, their delight in so little. I cannot help but think about President Benson's message on pride. I've read and reread Mosiah 3:19, "For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, 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."

There could not be a better description of the people of the Philippines. How do we become more humble? How do we strip away the things of the world? How do we put off the natural man? (Journal Entry of 26 May 1990)

Then, within days I was home. My very ordinary home suddenly seemed palatial. I could both understand others with ease and be understood. I could regulate the temperature and change other things to ensure my comfort and ease. And I felt in control and comfortable, but I felt much less dependent on the Lord. Not only did I feel I was in charge, but also that I could handle things on my own. I soon realized that I was not nearly as receptive to the Spirit as I had been in the Philippines, and I missed the companionship of the Holy Ghost. I sensed that something had happened, and it was of great concern to me.

I made a determination to study about and seek to acquire humility. I realized my lack of dependency on the Lord and reliance in my own strength kept me from being humble, and I determined I would begin by learning more about humility. I went first to the scriptures looking up every scripture that included the word *humility*, *meekness*, *submissiveness*, and one of my favorites became Ether 12:27. I then looked at what the prophets have taught about humility. The Prophet Joseph understood the relationship between being humble and receiving the Spirit of the Lord. David Whitmer told the following story which illustrates that:

At times when brother Joseph would attempt to translate . . . he found he was spiritually blind and could not translate. He told us that his mind dwelt too much on earthly things, and various causes would make him incapable of proceeding with the translation. When in this condition he would go out and pray, and when he became sufficiently humble before God, he could then proceed with the translation. Now we see how very strict the Lord is, and how he requires the heart of man to be just right in his sight before he can receive revelation. . . .

To illustrate so you can see: One morning when he was getting ready to continue the translation, something went wrong about the house and he was put out about it. Something that Emma, his wife, had done. Oliver and I went upstairs and Joseph came up soon after to continue the translation but he could not do anything. He could not translate a single syllable. He went downstairs, out into the orchard, and made supplication to the Lord; was gone about an hour—came back to the house, and asked Emma’s forgiveness and then came upstairs where we were and then the translation went on all right. He could do nothing save he was humble and faithful. (Roberts 1:130–31)

I also reviewed what modern-day prophets have taught us about humility. President Benson spoke about what humility does not mean. He said it does not mean weakness, lack of courage, lack of self-confidence, timidity, or fear. In fact, in *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, we find the following: “A person can be humble, powerful and courageous” (369). “You can be humble and still be vigorous and strong and fearless” (119). And “Humility is an acknowledged recognition of our dependence on a higher power” (369).

President Spencer W. Kimball also spoke of humility, as a strength, and not as a weakness. He said, “One can be courageous and humble. . . . If the Lord was meek and lowly and humble, then to become humble one must do what he did in boldly denouncing evil, bravely advancing righteous works, courageously meeting every problem, becoming the master of himself and the situations about him and being near oblivious to personal credit. Humility is not pre-tentious, presumptuous, nor proud. It is not weak, vacillating, nor servile. . . . *Humble* and *meek* properly suggest virtues, not weaknesses” (232).

Have Faith in God and Jesus Christ to Develop Humility

To develop humility requires faith in God and in his Son, Jesus Christ. King Benjamin taught his people to “believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things, both in heaven and in earth; believe that he has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in earth; believe that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend” (Mosiah 4:9). He emphasized, “If you believe all these things see that ye do them” (v 10).

Humility also requires an acknowledgement of a higher power. We must acknowledge God’s infinite wisdom, power, and presence, and see ourselves as finite and “unworthy creatures” (Mosiah 4:11).

Part of our weakness stems from the fact that we are mortal and God is immortal. Interestingly, in the Lord's instructions to Moroni, he says, "*If men come unto me . . . then will I make weak things become strong unto them*" (Ether 12:27; emphasis added). God first requires acknowledgement of his existence, his attributes, and our own nothingness. After the Lord had spoken, Moroni responded, "O Lord, thy righteous will be done, for I know that thou workest unto the children of men according to their faith" (v 29).

In some of Moroni's last writings, he chooses to quote the words of his father, Mormon, many of which deal with the importance of faith. For example, Mormon quotes Christ's words on faith: "If ye will have faith in me ye shall have power to do whatsoever thing is expedient in me" (Moroni 7:33), and then he adds his own testimony of faith: "It is by faith that miracles are wrought; and it is by faith that angels appear and minister unto men; wherefore, if these things have ceased wo be unto the children of men, for it is because of unbelief, and all is vain. For no man can be saved, according to the words of Christ, save they shall have faith in his name" (vv 37–38).

The prophet Jacob also understood the importance of faith. He speaks of his people's faith thus: "Our faith becometh unshaken, insomuch that we truly can command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey us, or the mountains, or the waves of the sea" (Jacob 4:6). He then tells us the same thing the Lord is teaching Moroni: "Nevertheless, the Lord God showeth us our weakness that we may know that it is by his grace, and his great condescensions unto the children of men, that we have power to do these things" (v 7).

Both the Lord and Jacob use the word *grace* to describe the source of power given to the faithful. The LDS Bible Dictionary notes that "the main idea of the word *grace* is divine means of help or strength, given through the bounteous mercy and love of Jesus Christ. . . . It is likewise through the grace of the Lord that individuals, through faith in the atonement of Jesus Christ and repentance of their sins, receive strength and assistance to do good works that they otherwise would not be able to maintain if left to their own means. This grace is an enabling power" (697). Elder Gene R. Cook spoke of the doctrine of grace in the general conference of May 1993:

We should have great hope in knowing, however unworthy we may feel or weak we may be, *that if we will do all we can*, He will come to our aid and provide for us whatever we may lack. . . . To obtain grace, one does not have

to be perfect but he does have to be trying to keep the commandments the best that he can. Then the Lord may allow him to receive that power. (80–81)

The Lord taught Moroni that his grace is “sufficient for all men that humble themselves” (Ether 12:27). This same principle was emphasized by the Apostle James: “God resisteth the proud, but he giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God” (James 4:6–7).

Fortunately, we do not have to face things alone; there is a higher source of power. When we feel weak or overwhelmed or inadequate, we must remember our dependence upon God, go to him, acknowledge his power, and ask for his grace. This is the essence of humility. King Benjamin taught this to his people: “I would that ye should remember . . . the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility, calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come” (Mosiah 4:11).

Ammon, the grandson of king Benjamin, recognized the power and grace of God in his own life. When he and his brothers returned from their missionary labors, he rejoiced that they had been made “instruments in the hands of God” to bring the gospel to the Lamanites (Alma 26:3). His brother Aaron feared that Ammon’s joy had carried him “away unto boasting” (v 10), but Ammon was quick to set the record straight: “I do not boast in my own strength, nor in my own wisdom. . . . Yea, I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things” (vv 11–12). Ammon is an example of what the Lord was teaching Moroni: weak things can become strong through His power. In a day when many people doubt the existence of God and rely on the arm of flesh, we need not only to choose to believe in God, but also to trust him in all things, for he is the source of all strength and power.

Look to the Savior’s Life and Teachings to Develop Humility

To truly learn about humility, we must look at the Savior’s life and teachings. He admonished us, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart” (Matt 11:29). Jesus was

humble in all things. Elder Neal A. Maxwell suggests that though Christ was

actually the Creator of this world, the earth being his footstool, Jesus' willingness to become from birth a person of "no reputation" provides one of the great lessons in human history. He, the leader-servant, who remained of "no reputation" mortally, will one day be he before whom every knee will bow and whose name every tongue will confess (see Philip 2:10-11). Jesus meekly stayed his unparalleled course. (57)

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Saints in Philippi that Christ had

made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of *things* in heaven, and *things* in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philip 2:7-11)

This is he who Isaiah said would be called "Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:6).

Christ is not only the Creator, but also the Exemplar, the Head of the Church, Jehovah, the Messenger of the Covenant, and the Messiah. And yet it is also Jesus who entered into Jerusalem "meek, and sitting upon an ass" (Matt 21:5). How did Jesus, who had the power to turn water into wine, make the blind to see, the lame to walk, and the dead to rise from their grave, so meekly stay his course? Christ not only knew he was the Son of God and what his relationship to God the Father was, but he also knew what his mission was, and he never lost sight of it. Even before his birth, he knew that he would do the Father's will and give all glory unto him (Moses 4:2). Repeatedly throughout his life, he made it clear that he had come to do the will of the Father. After healing a man at the pool at Bethesda he declared, "I can of mine own self do nothing. . . . I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me" (John 5:30). Even in the Garden of Gethsemane he said, "O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done" (Matt 26:42). To the Nephites, he said, "Behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which he Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world,

in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning” (3 Nephi 11:11). Later in his ministry among the Nephites, he reemphasized, “I came into the world to do the will of my Father” (27:13). He taught us that when we pray we should say, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (13:10). In this dispensation, he has said, “I am Jesus Christ; I came by the will of the Father, and I do his will” (D&C 19:24). Never did Christ take glory unto himself. What a lesson for each of us.

I have marveled that Christ, the Jehovah and Creator of this world, would have been placed into the world as a little child, totally dependent on others for every need. No doubt he was exemplar in all things, and perhaps it should not be surprising that there are several scriptures which speak not only of humility but couple it with our need to become as little children (Mosiah 3:18–19; Moroni 8:10). Nowhere is the statement more clear than in Matthew 18:1–5. It is interesting that Jesus’ response comes after the disciples had asked a very prideful question: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus called a little child to him and set him in the midst of the people and said, “Verily I say unto you, Except you be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:3–4).

King Benjamin taught that we can become Saints only “through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and [as we] becometh as a child, [we become] submissive, meek, humble, patient” (Mosiah 3:19). We have many other things to learn from children that help us become more humble. Young children are teachable and innocent, pure, genuine, and forgiving. Ardeth Kapp tells of a little girl who returned home from a neighbor’s house where her little friend had died:

“Why did you go?” questioned her father.

“To comfort her mother,” she said.

“What could you do to comfort her?”

“I climbed into her lap and cried with her,” she said. (98)

I learned also from a 13-year-old young woman about reaching out to others. Erika Monson was in Primary Children’s Hospital when she read in the *Church News* a story about a 2-year-old girl, Kirstin, fighting for her life. Finding someone who would donate bone marrow compatible with Kirstin’s was the only thing that would save her

life. No doubt many of us read the article. But a 13-year-old took the time to respond. She wrote to Kirstin's parents:

Dear Brother and Sister Doxey: How is your family doing? My name is Erika Monson. I am from Ely, Nevada. I am in Primary Children's Hospital and getting better. I know how hard things are for you and your family even though I'm thirteen. I hope that your daughter Kirstin is lucky and finds the right donor so she can hopefully live to be a young woman. If I was old enough to donate and wasn't on medicine for my liver, I would see if I matched your daughter's type. If so, I would do everything to make it so she would be able to live. I hope and pray for the best for your family. Love, Erika Monson. (Kapp 107)

How much we can learn from little children!

Conclusion

If the Lord did not give us weaknesses, it would be easy to take credit for our own accomplishments and to rely on our own strength. Weaknesses are a constant reminder of our dependence upon the Lord. When we take those weaknesses to him, in humility, we can become effectively joined with him in a great work. When we have done as much as we can do, his grace, that divine means of strength and help, can move us beyond our native abilities. We overcome our weakness when we have faith in him and acknowledge we can be better with his help than we can ever be on our own.

As we seek in this life to become more like our Savior Jesus Christ, may we turn to Moroni who taught us that in the Lord weak things can become strong. He says to each of us:

Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God. And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God. (Moroni 10:32-33)

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