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The Probationary Nature of Mortality

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Robert J. Matthews

Alma chapter 12 is part of a lengthy discourse delivered by Alma to the people of Ammonihah, while he and Amulek were engaged in a special mission. In this portion of the discourse, Alma emphasizes the doctrine of life as a probationary state, a time of imperfect knowledge, when we learn the gospel by degrees and show our commitment to it by righteous living. Only by keeping the commandments, Alma explains, can we free ourselves from the sins of this world and enter into “the rest of the Lord.”

The people of Ammonihah, being in a state of apostasy, were told by Alma and Amulek that “they were a hard-hearted and a stiffnecked people . . . a lost and a fallen people” (Alma 9:31–32), and that unless they repented they would “be visited with utter destruction” as a judgment from God (Alma 10:20–23). Alma, who was the high priest over the Church, and Amulek, a righteous resident of Ammonihah, spoke alternately, declaring that the Son of God would soon come to earth, and that they (the two brethren) were sent by revelation from God to deliver a warning message and teach the people how to repent. The Ammonihahites were angered by their words.

By inspiration, Amulek publicly exposed a devil-inspired plot of Zeezrom, one of the lawyers among the Ammonihahites who foremost opposed Amulek and Alma, which was calculated to embarrass the brethren. Amulek then delivered a

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pointed discourse on the doctrine of the Resurrection and also of the day in which every person will be required to give an account before the judgment bar in the presence of God. Although the entire audience was astonished at the doctrine Amulek taught them, Zeezrom was particularly fearful about the prospect of standing before God to answer for his conduct, and began to tremble “under a consciousness of his guilt” (Alma 11:21–46; 12:1).

Alma’s Discourse

The Mysteries of God

When Zeezrom wanted to know more about the Resurrection and the Judgment, Alma explained the basis on which the gospel is taught to the human family, showing that the mysteries of God are made clear only to the faithful. Here are Alma’s words:

It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him. And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full. And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries; and then they are taken captive by the devil, and led by his will down to destruction. Now this is what is meant by the chains of hell. (Alma 12:9–11)

Alma’s words explain a principle that determines the extent to which the gospel is taught at any one time to any individual or group. It is a matter of readiness based upon the personal desires and preferences of the receivers. The scriptures contain many examples of this principle in operation. You will remember Jacob’s saying to the Nephites: “If ye were holy I would speak unto you of holiness; but as ye are not holy, . . . it must needs be expedient that I teach you the consequences of sin”

(2 Nephi 9:48). The unspiritual condition and lack of readiness of the people determined what the Lord inspired Jacob to teach them.

Jesus used parables for this same reason. The very nature of a parable veils the deeper spiritual meaning from those who do not seek and inquire. Although it is a popular notion that Jesus taught with parables to make his points clear and easy to understand, it just isn't so. In the first place, Jesus did not use parables to instruct his believers, but rather to teach those who did not yet accept him. Jesus himself explained why he used parables. We read in Matthew chapter 13 that after he had spoken the parable of the sower to the multitude at the seaside in Galilee, "the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them [the multitude] in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you [disciples] to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given" (Matt 13:10–11). Jesus then explained: "For whosoever receiveth, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance; But whosoever continueth not to receive, from him shall be taken away even that he hath" (JST Matt 13:10–11; compare KJV Matt 13:12; D&C 1:33). Jesus explained further, "Therefore speak I to them [the multitude] in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand" (Matt 13:13). He then said that the people were as Isaiah had prophesied they would be, having hearts that are gross, ears that "are dull of hearing," and eyes that are closed (Matt 13:14–15). To such a people the Savior did not reveal the mysteries and sacred truths of heaven.

The book of Mark illustrates this point more explicitly. We read there that after Jesus had delivered the parable of the sower to the multitude, and "was alone with the twelve, and they that believed in him," they asked him the meaning of the parable. He replied, "Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables" (JST Mark 4:9–10). "And with many such parables spake he the word unto them [the multitude], as they

were able to bear. . . . And when they were alone, he expounded all things unto his disciples” (JST Mark 4:26–27). Late in his ministry, while engaged in fierce conversation with the Jewish rulers who opposed him, Jesus said, “And, again, hear another parable; for unto you that believe not, I speak in parables; that your unrighteousness may be rewarded unto you” (JST Matt 21:34).

Make no mistake about it, Jesus used parables to conceal the mysteries of the kingdom from the unworthy and the spiritually careless. Parables were so effective at concealing the message that Jesus often had to explain the meaning afterward even to the disciples.

Evidence of selective teaching is seen in Jesus’ directions to the Twelve in the Sermon on the Mount. We read from the Joseph Smith Translation:

Go ye into the world, saying unto all, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come nigh unto you. And the mysteries of the kingdom ye shall keep within yourselves; for it is not meet to give that which is holy unto the dogs; neither cast ye your pearls unto swine, lest they trample them under their feet. For the world cannot receive that which ye, yourselves, are not able to bear; wherefore ye shall not give your pearls unto them, lest they turn again and rend you. (JST Matt 7:9–11)

The deliberate withholding of spiritual information from those who do not believe is well-established in scripture. There may be a merciful purpose to this, since they cannot reject what they haven’t been taught. But mercy is not the only factor. There is justice also. The Lord withholds the greater spiritual truths from the proud and worldly-wise because they do not want to know, and do not value gospel truth enough to seek, ask, knock, or sacrifice anything to gain that knowledge. However, they cannot be saved in their willful ignorance, and thus “their unrighteousness is rewarded unto them” as Jesus said.

The Book of Mormon gives repeated examples of gospel truths being withheld until the person or the community is made ready by obedience. The prophet Mormon carefully explains

why he did not write more of the resurrected Savior's teachings to the people in ancient America:

And now there cannot be written in this book even a hundredth part of the things which Jesus did truly teach unto the people; But behold the plates of Nephi do contain the more part of the things which he taught the people. And these things have I written which are a lesser part of the things which he taught the people; and I have written them to the intent that they may be brought again unto this people, from the Gentiles, according to the words which Jesus hath spoken. And when they shall have received this, which is expedient that they should have first, to try their faith, and if it shall so be that they shall believe these things then shall the greater things be made manifest unto them. And if it so be that they will not believe these things, then shall the greater things be withheld from them, unto their condemnation. Behold, I was about to write them, all which were engraven upon the plates of Nephi, but the Lord forbade it, saying: I will try the faith of my people. (3 Nephi 26:6–11)

The prophet Moroni explained that the Lord will reveal to those who have faith like the brother of Jared the very things which the brother of Jared saw, “even to the unfolding unto them all my revelations, saith Jesus Christ. . . . And he that shall deny these [lesser] things, let him be accursed; for unto them will I show no greater things, saith Jesus Christ. . . . Come unto me, . . . and I will show unto you the greater things, the knowledge which is hid up because of unbelief” (Ether 4:7–13).

Even to the faithful and obedient the Lord does not reveal all things at once, but reveals line upon line, precept upon precept, as they are able to receive it (see Isa 28:10; D&C 98:12). Joseph Smith said: “God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 149).

Alma said these words:

I know that [God] granteth unto men according to their desire, whether it be unto death or unto life; yea, I know that he allotteth unto men, yea, decreeth unto them decrees which are unalterable, according to their wills, whether they be unto salvation or unto destruction. . . . For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations . . . all that he seeth fit that they should have; therefore we see that the

Lord doth counsel in wisdom, according to that which is just and true.
(Alma 29:4, 8)

Thus, if we do not have the deeper concepts of the gospel, it may be that we ourselves are to blame for our lack of desire and our unpreparedness. President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., dealt with this theme in October general conference in 1948: “The American Prophet has spoken; American prophets are speaking. . . . America does not need a [new] prophet; America needs a listening ear. And more than all, we who are here, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we need a listening ear” (685). Commenting on President Clark’s words thirty-one years later, President Spencer W. Kimball said:

While addressing the Saints from this pulpit in 1948, the late President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., spoke concerning having a prophet and a listening ear. He had read a pamphlet stating, “We need a prophet.” In answer he said, “No, we have had modern-day prophets for more than a hundred years, and they have given us the word of the Lord.” He continued, “The trouble with the world is they do not want a prophet teaching righteousness. They want a prophet that will tell them that what they are doing is right, no matter how wrong it may be.” A prophet has spoken—the prophet is speaking. We do not need another prophet. What we need is a listening ear. (6)

The Chains of Hell

Alma uses the phrase “chains of hell” twice in this discourse; once in 12:11 and once in 13:30. This very descriptive term is apparently one that Alma liked, for he used it three times in an earlier sermon to the people of Zarahemla (Alma 5:7, 9, 10). It occurs one other time in the Book of Mormon, in Ammon’s jubilant recounting of missionary success in which the Lord loosed many persons from “the chains of hell” (Alma 26:14). The term also occurs in Doctrine and Covenants 138:23, stating that the righteous in the spirit world rejoiced that the Son of God had delivered them from the “chains of hell.” The exact phrase does not occur in the Bible or the Pearl of Great Price, although Peter speaks of those who are in “chains of darkness” (2 Peter 2:4).

As defined by Alma, the “chains of hell” are the limitations people place upon themselves because of unbelief. As a result of unbelief, the greater manifestations of the Spirit and the greater gifts of spiritual knowledge are withheld, which leaves individuals unsaved and unaware of eternal things. Alma says that in such a state people are led by the devil down to destruction (Alma 12:11). Such unbelievers are actually in a spiritual deep-freeze and are in danger of freezing to death, but don’t even know that they are cold. Unless they are awakened and aroused and made to exercise, they will die spiritually. The devil slips his chains around them so subtly and carefully that he snares and binds them almost before they realize it. In the words of Nephi, the devil “leadeth them by the neck with a flaxen cord [ie, a soft cord], until he bindeth them with his strong cords forever” (2 Nephi 26:22). Nephi also describes the devil’s chains as “awful chains” (2 Nephi 28:22) and “everlasting chains” (2 Nephi 28:19). Alma called them the “everlasting chains of death” (Alma 36:18). Chains are so much more meaningful than ropes, for they are heavier and stronger, and they clank.

Jacob Marley, in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, came to know why many are bound by chains. When he appeared as a ghost, he wore a long chain, and Scrooge asked him why he was thus fettered: “‘I wear the chain I forged in life,’ replied the Ghost. ‘I made it link by link, and yard by yard.’” Marley then warned Scrooge that he had already formed “a ponderous chain” of his own, though he was unaware of it (100).

In a vision, the prophet Enoch saw a representation of the power of the devil, the master of hell, who “had a great chain in his hand, and it veiled the whole face of the earth with darkness; and [the devil] looked up and laughed, and his angels rejoiced” (Moses 7:26). The veil of darkness signified by the chain is the veil of unbelief and spiritual darkness clouding the minds of human beings all over the earth—a condition which pleases the devil.

The Reality of the Judgment

At the request and inquiry of Zeezrom, Alma reinforces Amulek's teaching about the literal resurrection of the body and the vivid reality of a day of judgment and accountability to God "according to our works" (Alma 12:12). Alma's colorful description of the plight of the unworthy is as follows:

Then if our hearts have been hardened, yea, if we have hardened our hearts against the word, insomuch that it has not been found in us, then will our state be awful, for then we shall be condemned. For our words will condemn us, yea, all our works will condemn us; we shall not be found spotless; and our thoughts will also condemn us; and in this awful state we shall not dare to look up to our God; and we would fain be glad if we could command the rocks and the mountains to fall upon us to hide us from his presence. But this cannot be; we must come forth and stand before him in his glory, and in his power, and in his might, majesty, and dominion, and acknowledge to our everlasting shame that all his judgments are just; that he is just in all his works, and that he is merciful unto the children of men, and that he has all power to save every man that believeth on his name and bringeth forth fruit meet for repentance. (Alma 12:13–15)

The Second Death

Alma and Amulek carefully explain that every person shall rise from the dead, immortal—the spirit and body being reunited—never to be separated or to die again. However, at the time of the Final Judgment, after the Resurrection, the wicked will suffer a second death—not a death of the body, but a death as to righteousness—a spiritual death, meaning they will be banished from God's presence, and from his joy and happiness, forever.

Alma's words are as follows:

And now behold, I say unto you then cometh a death, even a second death, which is a spiritual death; then is a time that whosoever dieth in his sins, as to a temporal death, shall also die a spiritual death; yea, he shall die as to things pertaining unto righteousness. Then is the time when their torments shall be as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever; and then is the time that they shall be chained down to an everlasting destruction, according to the power and captivity of Satan, he having subjected them

according to his will. Then, I say unto you, they shall be as though there had been no redemption made; for they cannot be redeemed according to God's justice; and they cannot die, seeing there is no more corruption. (Alma 12:16–18)

From other passages we learn more fully why this banishment is called a second death. The doctrine is this: At the time of creation, Adam and Eve were in the presence of God. The Fall brought upon them and their posterity two deaths: (1) a temporal death, which is the physical death—the cemetery death; and (2) a spiritual death in which they were shut out from the presence of the Lord. Spiritual death does not mean the death of one's spirit, but means to be out of God's presence and to be dead as to righteousness. Every person born into the world suffers these two deaths. There are no exceptions. All of us have been shut out of the presence of God, and all of us shall experience physical death.

The atonement of Jesus Christ ransoms and rescues all mankind, without exception, from both deaths brought by the Fall of Adam. This means that every person will die physically and every person will be resurrected physically from the grave and be given everlasting life. In like manner, every person, regardless of worthiness or unworthiness, will also be reclaimed from the spiritual death and will be brought back into the presence of God for the Final Judgment. No matter how wicked or unrepentant, every person will, after the Resurrection, be brought back into the presence of God for judgment. Thus all will be reclaimed from the two deaths that resulted from the fall of Adam. Those who are righteous will remain in his presence. Those who are still unclean and filthy at the time of judgment will be sent away from his presence a second time, and thus they die a second spiritual death. Only the sons of perdition suffer the complete second death. This is clearly detailed by Samuel the Lamanite in Helaman 14:15–18, by Moroni in Mormon 9:12–13, and by the Lord in D&C 29:40–44 and 76:37–38.

*Cherubim and a Flaming Sword:
Our Need for a Probationary State*

We are familiar with the account in Genesis telling that after Adam and Eve had fallen and become mortal the Lord placed cherubim “and a flaming sword which turned every way” as a barrier to prevent them from eating of the fruit of the tree of life and living forever in their sins (Gen 3:22–24). However, in neither Genesis nor the book of Moses are the implications of this situation clearly defined. We can be grateful to Alma for an explanation.

Alma’s discourse on this subject was prompted by a question from one Antionah, a chief ruler among the Ammonihahites who doubted the doctrine of the Resurrection because he had interpreted the account of the flaming sword to mean that since Adam and Eve were prevented from eating of the fruit of the tree of life, “there was no possible chance that they should live forever” (Alma 12:20–21).

Alma’s explanation points out that the reason for preventing Adam and Eve from eating of the tree of life was to give them a period of time in which to repent. Had they eaten of the tree of life immediately, they would have lived forever in their sins. Thus God prevented that and gave them time to repent. Here are Alma’s words:

There was a space granted unto man in which he might repent; therefore this life became a probationary state; a time to prepare to meet God; a time to prepare for that endless state which has been spoken of by us, which is after the resurrection of the dead. . . . And now behold, if it were possible that our first parents could have gone forth and partaken of the tree of life they would have been forever miserable, having no preparatory state; and thus the plan of redemption would have been frustrated, and the word of God would have been void, taking none effect. (Alma 12:24, 26)

As seen by Alma’s explanation, eating of the fruit of the tree of life brings about the same condition that is brought about by the Resurrection. By postponing mankind’s immortality with an interval for repentance, followed by death and resurrection, the Lord made mortal life a temporary probation, a time

to prepare for eternity. Therefore, if a person “wasteth the days of his probation, . . . awful is his state” (2 Nephi 9:27), for he is in the same condition that would have prevailed if Adam and Eve had partaken of the tree of life immediately and continued forever in their sins, shut out from the presence of God, and thus in a state of misery. Those who waste the days of their probation are as though there were no plan of redemption and no atonement, except for the resurrection from the grave.

The Rest of the Lord

In discoursing upon the responsibilities of mankind during the mortal probationary state, Alma draws upon an Old Testament concept from the days of the children of Israel in the wilderness and their entering into the promised land of Palestine. The Lord promised the Israelites that if they would keep his commandments he would lead them out of Egypt, through the terrible wilderness, and into the promised land where he would give them rest. They would find rest from their enemies, rest from their travels, and rest from all their sorrows and tribulations. The promise was that the presence of the Lord would be with them as they traveled—if they would obey the commandments (see Ex 33:14).

However, due to fears, doubts, transgression, and the failure of the Israelites to believe in his promised protection and divine nurturing, the Lord withdrew his presence and swore in his wrath that they would not enter into his rest while in the wilderness. This is recounted in Psalm 95:7–11:

To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work. Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways: Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest.

In this part of his discourse Alma speaks of two types of commandments. “The first commandments” were given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, which, when broken,

brought them knowledge of good and evil, placing them in a position to act “according to their wills . . . whether to do evil or to do good” (Alma 12:31). The penalty for breaking these commandments was death. After they were mortal and in a condition to act, the Lord then gave Adam and Eve another set of commandments, making known to them the plan of salvation and commanding “that they should not do evil, the penalty thereof being a second death, which was an everlasting death as to things pertaining unto righteousness; for on such the plan of redemption could have no power” (Alma 12:32).

Alma compares mankind’s spiritual journey through life to the physical journey of Israel through the wilderness. Here are his words:

But God did call on men, in the name of his Son, (this being the plan of redemption which was laid) saying: If ye will repent, and harden not your hearts, then will I have mercy upon you, through mine Only Begotten Son;

Therefore, whosoever repenteth, and hardeneth not his heart, he shall have claim on mercy through mine Only Begotten Son, unto a remission of his sins; and these shall enter into my rest.

And whosoever will harden his heart and will do iniquity, behold, I swear in my wrath that he shall not enter into my rest.

And now, my brethren, behold I say unto you, that if ye will harden your hearts ye shall not enter into the rest of the Lord; therefore your iniquity provoketh him that he sendeth down his wrath upon you as in the first provocation, yea, according to his word in the last provocation as well as the first, to the everlasting destruction of your souls; therefore, according to his word, unto the last death, as well as the first.

And now, my brethren, seeing we know these things, and they are true, let us repent, and harden not our hearts, that we provoke not the Lord our God to pull down his wrath upon us in these his second commandments which he has given unto us; but let us enter into the rest of God, which is prepared according to his word. (Alma 12:33–37)

According to Alma’s explanation, the first commandment given to Adam and Eve on this earth was that they not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the penalty being death. Because they transgressed and were shut out of God’s presence, suffering death as a consequence, God gave them and their children the second commandments, otherwise known as the

gospel of Jesus Christ or plan of redemption. The penalty for breaking these commandments is the second death, an everlasting spiritual death. The “first provocation” was in the Garden of Eden; God kept his word and brought death as a consequence. The second provocation was with the children of Israel in the wilderness. Again, God kept his word and withdrew his presence. He did not allow those who came out of Egypt to enter the promised land, but caused them to die in the wilderness without finding rest, neither rest for their bodies nor for their spirits.

Alma warns that since God was true to his word in earlier provocations, we have reason to believe that he will be equally true to his word, if we provoke him by our disobedience. This concept was clearly expressed by Elder Orson Pratt in speaking of the penalty for breaking the second commandments:

What is the penalty? Second death. . . . “If you cease not to do evil, you shall be punished with everlasting destruction from my presence, and from the glory of my power,” saith the Lord.

“But,” says one, “He is so merciful, that He would not inflict such a penalty upon us.” Have you ever seen a man who has escaped from the first death? or who had any prospect of it? No; you cannot find a remedy to hinder him from going down to his grave. Has there been any escape for any individual for 6000 years past? Now, if the Lord has been punctual to make every man, woman, and child, suffer the penalty of the first transgression, why should you suppose that you can stand in His presence, and behold the glory of His power, and have everlasting life and happiness, when He has told you that you should be banished therefrom, that the second death should be inflicted upon you? For the first provocation, He has fulfilled to the very letter the penalty of the law; so will He in the second, and there is no escape. Says one, “Is there no escape?” No; not so far as you are able to provide. But I will tell you that there is redemption for man from [meaning “to prevent”] this second death or penalty, and the Lord remains a perfect, just Being, His justice being magnified.

There is a way of escape from the effects of your own individual transgressions, but it is different from the redemption from the original sin of Adam. The redemption from that sin was universal without works, but the redemption from your own personal sins is universal with works on the part of the creature—universal in its nature, because it is free to all, but not received by all. The salvation, or redemption from your own sins, is not by free grace alone, it requires a little work. But what are the works? Jesus Christ, through his death and sufferings, has answered the

penalty, on condition that you believe in him, and repent of your sins, and be baptized for the remission of them, and receive the Gift of the Holy Ghost, by the laying on of hands, and continue humble, and meek, and prayerful, until you go down to your graves. (*Journal of Discourses* 1:288–89)

It is evident that Elder Pratt was paraphrasing Alma's speech in Alma chapter 12.

Phrases similar to "enter into the rest of the Lord" appear in the Old Testament, in the Book of Mormon, as well as in Hebrews chapters 3 and 4, and in D&C 84:24. As noted, "the rest of the Lord" can refer both to physical rest and to spiritual rest. In Doctrine and Covenants 84:24, *rest* is defined as the fulness of God's glory. The word can also mean *remainder*. Since God gives us only according to our readiness and diligence, what the faithful receive is "the rest of the Lord," meaning they shall receive the remainder, the rest of the knowledge and blessings God bestows upon his faithful children.

As Alma has taught us, this life is the probationary time wherein we must prepare ourselves to receive that rest.

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