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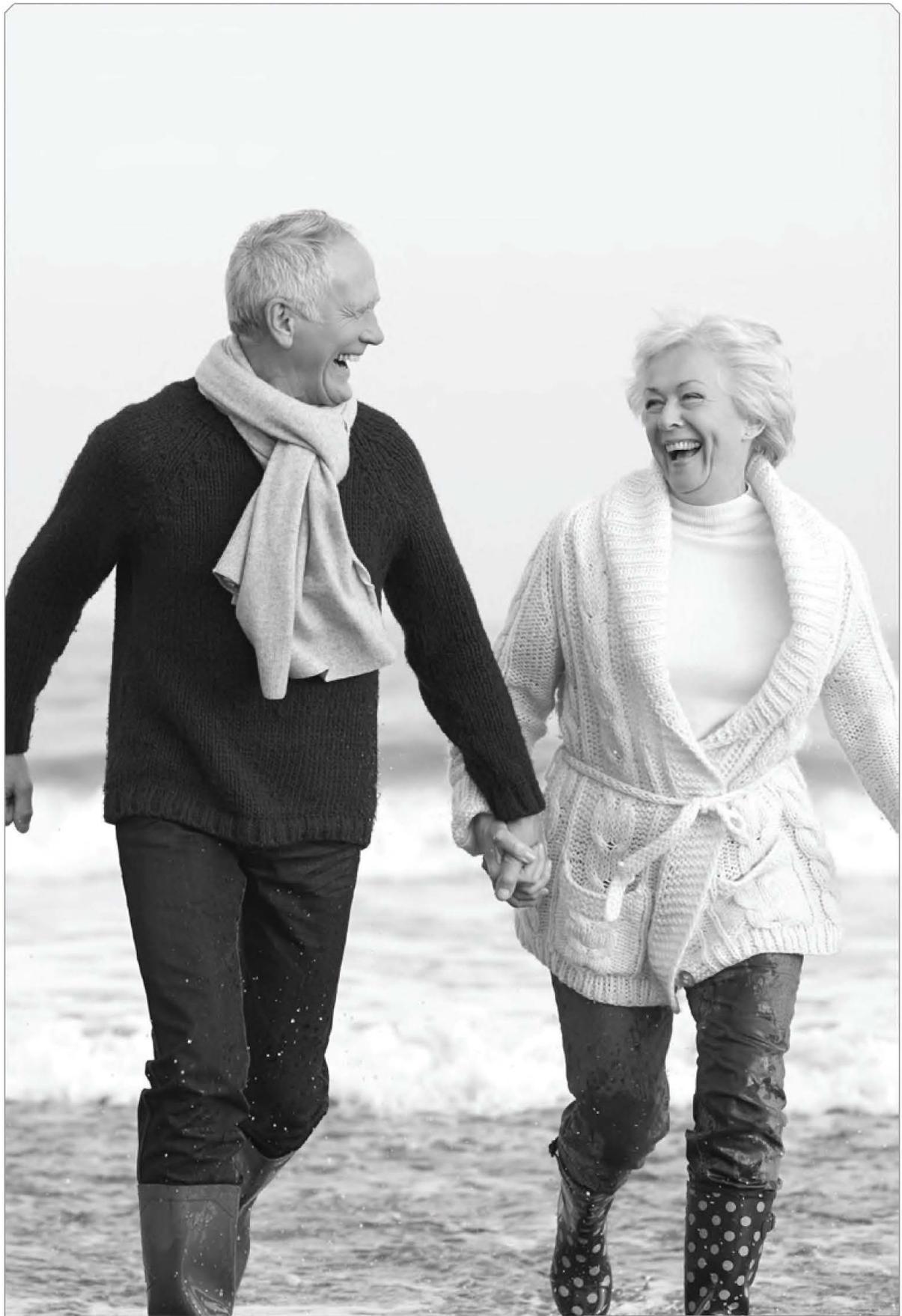


Photo by Cathy Yenicki.

“For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.”

“After All We Can Do” (2 Nephi 25:23)

JARED W. LUDLOW

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A Book of Mormon verse that has led to immense discussion and scrutiny is 2 Nephi 25:23: “For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.” It is particularly the last part of the verse, “after all we can do,” that has garnered the most attention since it seems to qualify the statement on grace and leads interpreters to define what grace means in LDS belief and consequently what role our efforts or works play in relation to grace. A significant article dealing with this verse, and to which this article is responding and nuancing, was written by Joseph Spencer in 2014.¹ Spencer’s excellent analysis of this verse reinforces the importance of focusing on the context of this verse, particularly the grammatical subjects within the verse, in order to pull the meaning out of the last phrase. Yet unlike Spencer’s article, which is a theological reading of the scripture, this piece will try to focus more on Nephi’s historical situation in an effort to better understand what Nephi’s words meant in their initial context (something Spencer cursorily alludes to in a later section of his paper). Too often the last half of the verse is touted as an overarching statement of LDS

doctrine on grace without paying careful attention to its meaning within its original literary context. Nephi's original context, especially the verses that follow verse 23, emphasizes salvation only coming through Christ, yet it also encourages continued observance of the law of Moses in order to be reconciled to God, for that is all they could do until Christ fulfilled the law through his Atonement.

Spencer raises five excellent questions from the reading of 2 Nephi 25:23 that highlight the verse's ambiguities and, consequently, its difficulty for interpretation. The simple reading and traditional interpretation of verse 23, that grace comes chronologically *after* we have expended our best efforts, is the least likely correct interpretation even though it is often provided as a proof text on the role of grace in LDS theology (and thus is frequently used as fodder by critics of the Church who feel that Latter-day Saints maintain a theology of "earning" salvation). Thus I agree with Spencer's conclusion that "the obvious reading of 2 Nephi 25:23 is anything but obvious."² In order to set the stage for a discussion of a possible meaning of this verse, a brief discussion with Spencer's five questions will follow.

Spencer's Five Questions

Question 1 asks who the subject "we" in the verse is understood to be and whether that subject changes. I concur with Spencer that a key to understanding this verse is that the subject does not change, and thus the "we" is Nephi and other record keepers, prophets, and teachers who want to persuade their own children and brethren to believe in Christ. In other words, it is primarily directed to their own people in their own day.

Question 2 asks whether there is a difference between "believing in Christ" and being "reconciled to God," and which of them (or both) is connected to grace? As will be shown below, "reconciled to God" seems to be tied with keeping the Mosaic covenant under which they were bound, while "believing in Christ" helped them remember to whom the law was pointed and who is the ultimate source of salvation. "Believing in Christ" was more linked to grace since Christ not only fulfilled the law of Moses but satisfied the law of justice, a gift offered through Christ's Atonement.

Question 3 points out the clear connection between salvation and grace and thus asks how this relationship should affect our interpretation of this verse. Nephi seems to emphasize this incontrovertible relationship so that his listeners and readers will never think there is another way to salvation, such as

the law of Moses. It is similar to what Abinadi would later teach the priests of King Noah when he responded to his own question directed to them: Does salvation come by the law of Moses? (see Mosiah 12:31). He stated, “And now ye have said that salvation cometh by the law of Moses. I say unto you that it is expedient that ye should keep the law of Moses *as yet*; but I say unto you, that the time shall come when it shall no more be expedient to keep the law of Moses. And moreover, I say unto you, that salvation doth not come by the law alone; and were it not for the atonement, which God himself shall make for the sins and iniquities of his people, that they must unavoidably perish, notwithstanding the law of Moses” (Mosiah 13:27–28; emphasis added).

Question 4 explores the possible meanings of “after” in this verse, which is certainly one of most important issues since it can dramatically alter the verse’s interpretation. As alluded to previously, “*after* all we can do” is often interpreted as some type of chronological disclaimer that creates a relationship between grace and our best efforts or works. After we have exhausted all our efforts, grace will then make up the difference and fill in the gap until we qualify for salvation.³ The difficulty with this view is determining the role of grace *before* we have done all that we can do. Another difficulty is determining when we have done enough, or our “best,” in order for Christ to do the rest?

Some commentators, like Stephen Robinson, have defined “after” as something different from a chronological marker, more a term of separation. In this case, “after” becomes something like “in spite of” or “notwithstanding” to emphasize the absolute role of grace in our salvation after all is said and done.⁴ The possible problem with this view is determining the role of one’s own *works* in relation to salvation, especially in Nephi’s context. It can lead to the notion that we do not need to do anything and we will be saved. Yet there are many scriptures that emphasize Christ’s commands to repent and obey, in other words, to be a faithful, covenant-keeping disciple (e.g., Mosiah 2:24; John 14:15; 2 Nephi 32:1, 3–5).⁵ As will be discussed below, Nephi does seem to use “after” with a chronological sense, but more in the sense of the sequence in God’s salvation history (the various acts or epochs through which he works with his children here on earth), not “after” our own works.

In question 5, Spencer explores how the wording of the verse would be different if Nephi had meant “after we have done all we can do.” Stated another way, if Nephi didn’t word it this way, why is it often interpreted in this sense? Thus question 5 focuses on the distinction between what *can be* done versus what *has been* done. I agree with Spencer here that the emphasis

is not on what Nephi, his family, and his followers did or accomplished in the past (or their works), but it presents what is expected of them to do, what *can be* done, even if that is not the cause of salvation.

We will now try to explore this verse in more depth, paying particular attention to its literary context to hopefully better understand Nephi's original intent and teaching. The discussion of the context will help us better understand the subjects of verse 23 and the progression of the argument Nephi is making in this chapter.

Literary Context—Before 2 Nephi 25:23b

Second Nephi 25 comes after Nephi has quoted many chapters from Isaiah. He starts this chapter sharing his feelings on the importance of Isaiah for his people despite the fact that he has not taught them in the manner of the Jews, a deficiency which has made some of Isaiah's sayings hard for them to understand. Nephi mentions that he will now speak in plainness and prophesy so that his readers can understand Isaiah's words, particularly his prophecies regarding the house of Israel and its gathering in the last days. Nephi states that for those who think Isaiah's words are of no worth, he will speak particularly to them "and confine the words unto mine own people" (2 Nephi 25:8). Through the Spirit, Nephi shares prophecies about the coming of the Messiah among the house of Israel and its subsequent rejection of him. As a result, the house of Israel will be scattered and scourged for many generations until it believes in the Son of God and does not wait for another Messiah (see 2 Nephi 25:16). "Then, at that time," Nephi states, "the day will come that it must needs be expedient that they should believe these things [Nephi's prophecies about Christ's atoning mission]" (2 Nephi 25:16). God will then proceed to gather the members of the house of Israel and his words will judge them and convince them of the true Messiah they had rejected.

Nephi next gives a plain prophecy that the Messiah would come among his people in six hundred years from the time they left Jerusalem, and his name would be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God (2 Nephi 25:19). Then, teaching by analogy,⁶ Nephi shows that just as Moses and the children of Israel were powerfully delivered through God's hand, "There is none other name given under heaven save it be this Jesus Christ, of which I have spoken, whereby man can be saved" (2 Nephi 25:20). This statement is consistent with other places in scripture where physical deliverance is a sign that God can also save us spiritually (e.g., Alma 38:4–5) and corresponds to what Nephi

will emphasize a few verses later, that salvation can only come through Jesus Christ.

In the ensuing verses, Nephi shares that God promised that his writings would be preserved and handed down to his seed. He also explains that Joseph (of the Old Testament) was promised that his seed would never perish (2 Nephi 25:21), which sets up Nephi’s next prophetic statement and leads up to our verse in question: “Wherefore, these things [Nephi’s writings and prophecies] shall go from generation to generation as long as the earth shall stand; and they shall go according to the will and pleasure of God; and the nations who shall possess them shall be judged of them according to the words which are written” (2 Nephi 25:22). Then in verse 23, Nephi suddenly goes from first person singular to first person plural without explaining who is joining him. “For *we* labor diligently to write, to persuade *our* children, and also *our* brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God” (emphasis added). It could have reference back to the only other plural group mentioned in this chapter—the prophets—whose words, along with the words of the angel of God, prophesy of Jesus’s name and his coming mission in mortality (see verse 19). Or, more in line with what follows, he could be referring to others in his own day, such as his brothers Jacob and Joseph, who were consecrated teachers of the people (see 2 Nephi 5:26) and who would labor diligently to teach and write to their children and brethren about Christ.

Thus the context of 25:23b includes the following:

- Nephi emphasizes the importance of Isaiah’s prophecies regarding the scattering and gathering of the members of the house of Israel and the role of the Messiah among them.
- Nephi focuses his plain words on those who do not think Isaiah’s words are important, and he confines his words to his own people.
- The house of Israel will reject the Messiah and be scattered until it believes in the Son of God; then it will believe “these things” (presumably his writings and those of Isaiah and others in the record).
- Nephi reiterates the doctrine that there is no other name save Jesus Christ through which salvation can come.
- Nephi knows his records will be preserved and passed down to his seed, so the writers of the record labor diligently so that their posterity and brethren can believe in Christ and be reconciled with God.



Photo by Matt Reier, *Portrait of Jesus*. Courtesy of Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

How do we determine when we have done enough, or our “best,” in order for Christ to do the rest?

Literary Context—After 2 Nephi 25:23b

Saved by Grace after All We Can Do

In the second half of 2 Nephi 25:23, Nephi continues to talk using the first person plural, *we*: “For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23). One important point to note is that the subject *we* remains consistent throughout the verse. Just as *we* labor diligently to write and persuade *our* children and brethren, so *we* know it is by grace that *we* are saved, after all *we* can do. In other words, the last phrase is not a universal statement on grace in God’s plan of salvation but a limited statement about Nephi’s and associated record keepers’ own situation and purpose. This setting raises the question, What did Nephi believe that he and his people needed to do? The context of this verse helps answer this question.

2 Nephi 25:24—We Keep the Law of Moses until the Law Shall be Fulfilled

Although many people interpret our phrase in 2 Nephi 25:23 with little or no attention to what follows, the literary context demands a connective

reading. First, verse 24 is strongly linked to the previous verse by the use of the conjunctions “and notwithstanding.” Second, both verses have the same *we* subject, and third, both verses seem to be using a series of alternating parallel phrases:

A “And, notwithstanding we believe in Christ,
 B we keep the law of Moses,
 A and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ,
 B until the law shall be fulfilled” (2 Nephi 25:24).

If this verse, full of a series of parallel phrases, is a continuation of the previous verse—the first pair of phrases having to do with Christ (A) and the second pair with the law of Moses (B)—then it may inform our reading of verse 23. The conjunction “notwithstanding” is key to deciphering its interpretation. “*Notwithstanding* we believe in Christ” is connected to verse 23’s efforts to persuade their children to believe in Christ and his redeeming grace. Yet *notwithstanding* this belief, they continue to keep the law of Moses until it is fulfilled because it is all they *can do* for the time being. According to the logic of this parallelism, belief and grace in verse 23 refer to Christ, and “be reconciled to God” and “all we can do” refer to observance of the law of Moses.⁷ In other words, all Nephi and his people *can do* in a pre-Christ setting is keep the law of Moses to be reconciled to God while believing and looking forward to Jesus’s Atonement in the future.⁸ Nephi knew that the Atonement is what would bring ultimate salvation *after* Christ’s fulfillment of the law of Moses (“fulfillment” connotes not only the law’s completion but Christ’s perfect obedience to it in order to bring it to its completion). In the meantime, the law of Moses provided a way to be reconciled with God, to be obedient and faithful to what God had asked of them, and to receive all the blessings of the future Atonement.

2 Nephi 25:25—We Keep the Law Because of the Commandments

The next verse (2 Nephi 25:25), especially with the expegetical conjunction “for,” connects with the previous thought and carries on the discussion of the importance of keeping the law for the time being while expounding upon the relationship between Jesus Christ and the law of Moses:

A “For, for this end was the law given;
 B wherefore the law hath become dead unto us,
 B’ and we are made alive in Christ because of our faith;
 A’ yet we keep the law because of the commandments” (2 Nephi 25:25).

This verse explains the purpose for which the law was given (to point towards Christ and his fulfillment of the law) and the sentiment that the law has become dead unto them because they know it will be fulfilled: a sentiment, incidentally, shared by Paul in a postresurrection setting. A true understanding of and faith in Christ's mission—whether living before, during, or after Jesus's ministry—include a realization that he is the source of salvation, not the law. The law is only preparatory and instructive. The law does not bring them true life, but they are made alive through faith in Christ, a very Pauline-like statement. Yet they continue keeping the law because they were commanded to do so; at this point, it is all they *can do*.⁹

2 Nephi 25:26–27—The Deadness of the Law Versus Life in Christ

Verses 26 and 27 continue the contrast between Christ as the source for remission of sins and the deadness of the law. The emphasis also remains on teaching their children about the law so that the children can learn of its deadness. It is as if they are living in a limbo status where they know the law is not the ultimate source of salvation, yet they still teach and keep it until Christ comes to fulfill it.¹⁰ “Wherefore, we speak concerning the law that our children may know the deadness of the law; and they, by knowing the deadness of the law, may look forward unto that life which is in Christ, and know for what end the law was given” (2 Nephi 25:27).¹¹ The end of verse 27 includes the same word “after” as in verse 23, delineating the chronological sequence between the two key events in God's salvation history we have been discussing, the law of Moses and Christ's atonement: “And *after* the law is fulfilled in Christ, that they need not harden their hearts against him when the law ought to be done away” (2 Nephi 25:27; emphasis added). Nephi was trying to teach that the law of Moses would serve a purpose for a period of time, but he was concerned some would resist giving up the law *after* its fulfillment by Christ because it was what they had observed for so long to bring them closer to God. Nephi prophetically saw the struggle many Jews and even early Christians and later Nephites faced with the teaching that old things like the law of Moses would be done away. This foresight was fulfilled when, during Jesus's visit to the later Nephites, Jesus perceived that they struggled to understand this concept that he had given as part of his sermon at the temple mount (see 3 Nephi 12:17–20, 46–47; 15:2–5). Jesus had to emphasize that he had given the law earlier but that the law had been fulfilled in him and had ended, so now they needed to keep the commandments he was now teaching them to enter the kingdom of heaven. “Behold, I say unto you that the law is

fulfilled that was given unto Moses. Behold, I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel; therefore, the law in me is fulfilled, for I have come to fulfil the law; therefore it hath an end” (3 Nephi 15:4–5). “Therefore come unto me and be ye saved; for verily I say unto you, that except ye shall keep my commandments, which I have commanded you at this time, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (3 Nephi 12:20).

2 Nephi 25:30–26:1—We Keep the Law Until the Law Shall Be Fulfilled

In 2 Nephi 25:30, Nephi repeats his key teaching that, in the meantime and until the law is fulfilled, it is necessary to keep the law of Moses: “And, inasmuch as it shall be expedient, ye must keep the performances and ordinances of God *until* the law shall be fulfilled which was given unto Moses” (2 Nephi 25:30; emphasis added). The chronological pointer “until” relates to the notion that Christ’s saving mission and fulfillment of the law will come *after* the only thing they *can do* now, which is keep the performances and ordinances of the law of Moses. The next verse teaches that once Christ fulfills his mission and appears to Nephi’s descendants, his words will become the new law: “And *after* Christ shall have risen from the dead he shall show himself unto you, my children, and my beloved brethren; and the words which he shall speak unto you shall be the law which ye shall do” (2 Nephi 26:1; emphasis added). A few chapters later, Nephi repeats a similar point when he says that no more doctrine would be given “until after he [Jesus] shall manifest himself unto you in the flesh. And when he shall manifest himself unto you in the flesh, the things which he shall say unto you shall ye observe to do” (2 Nephi 32:6). Jesus himself reiterated this principle when he clearly declared in 3 Nephi 15:9–10, “I am the law” and “I have given unto you the commandments; therefore keep my commandments.” The eventual Nephite implementation of all this is related in 4 Nephi 1:12: “And they did not walk any more after the performances and ordinances of the law of Moses; but they did walk after the commandments which they had received from their Lord and their God.”

Thus the context of 2 Nephi 25:23 can be summarized as follows:

- The topic of verse 23 continues in the next several verses through the use of conjunctions and the same *we* subject (which included Nephi and other prophets and record keepers), describing their specific situation: teaching their children to believe in the coming Messiah while living under the law of Moses.

- Parallel phrases contrast grace and Christ with “all they can do” and the law of Moses.
- Strong statements describe life coming through Christ and deadness to the law, yet a temporal disclaimer is given that they continue to keep the law because they have been commanded to do so.
- A recognition that *after* the law of Moses is fulfilled, Christ’s words will become the new law, the new path to salvation.

Summary

As enticing as it is to read 2 Nephi 25:23 as a universal doctrinal statement about the relationship between grace and one’s good efforts or works, the context of the verse points to something else. Nephi was writing for himself and other record keepers to a specific audience, his children and brethren (“I ... confine the words unto mine own people”; 2 Nephi 25:8). They understood that salvation came through the grace offered by the future Messiah, Jesus Christ, and that that salvation would come *after* all they *could do* living the law of Moses in their current situation. They knew that the law of Moses alone could not bring them salvation—it was a dead end—but they continued to observe its performances and ordinances for three primary reasons: they had been commanded to do so, it would reconcile them to God, and it pointed them towards Christ. It was all they *could do* until Christ appeared unto their descendants following his resurrection and taught them his new law. So ultimately they (Nephi and his pre-Christ descendants) knew they were saved by the grace of Christ’s atoning mission, which would be fulfilled later chronologically (i.e., in the meridian of time), yet they also already received blessings of grace by concurrently doing all they could do (keeping the law of Moses). This passage is not an argument of doing good works to the point when grace kicks in, but, as in Galatians, it is a recognition that we are saved by grace through the coming of Christ to perform the Atonement (the chronological “after”), not through the works of the law of Moses (see Galatians 2:16; 3:19–25). Christ’s Atonement is the greatest manifestation and source of grace, and its full blessings came after, because the law of Moses was fulfilled. Therefore, Nephi and others teach their children about Christ, the source of remission of sins (verse 26), and the deadness of the law and the purpose for which the law was given (verse 27). It is ironic that 2 Nephi 25:23 has often been used as ammunition by “grace only” believers who feel that the Book of Mormon somehow lessens or denies grace because it requires

followers to do all the works they can do *before* grace can save. But what Nephi is actually writing here is a very Pauline-like statement to his children and brethren that even after all they can do under the law of Moses, which they must still obey because it has been commanded of them and is part of their covenant relationship to God, it is only the grace of Christ, not that law, that can save.

Likening 2 Nephi 25:23

Since Jesus Christ has already fulfilled the law of Moses, what does 2 Nephi 25:23 have to do with us today? If we follow Nephi’s example (see 1 Nephi 19:23) and liken this verse to ourselves, thereby removing it from its original context, we can draw interpretations on the relationship between grace and *our* works based on this verse. For example, many draw analogies between our repentance and reliance on the merits of Christ to the statement made by the Anti-Nephi-Lehies in Alma 24:11: “It has been all that we could do (as we were the most lost of all mankind) to repent of all our sins . . . , for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain.” So all we can do is repent. This is certainly consistent with Christ’s teachings in 3 Nephi that everyone must follow his new commandments and his doctrine to repent and be baptized (see 3 Nephi 11:32–33). What both of these instances indicate is an effort on our part to reconcile with God. The literal sense of reconcile is “to call back into union.”¹² This is certainly one of the aspects of the Atonement, to bring us back at one with God, so that we can be cleansed and made worthy of entering his presence.

Jacob, a likely source for Nephi’s teaching in 25:23 as argued by Joseph Spencer, taught the principle of reconciliation in 2 Nephi 10: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh; and remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved” (2 Nephi 10:24). Note the use of “after” in this passage also. *After* being reconciled unto God we should remember that our efforts at reconciliation will not be the source of salvation, for it is only in and through the grace of God that we are saved; but the repeated invitation in scripture is to take that step to return and reconcile to God—that is all we can do. Since the fulfillment of the law of Moses by Jesus Christ, Christ has invited us to follow his law in order to receive salvation, so in this sense it is all we can do since our merits alone would not bring salvation.¹³ Just as Nephi taught that they still kept the law of Moses because they were commanded to do so by the premortal Jehovah,

likewise we do what we are commanded by the Savior in the post-Atonement conditions of salvation.

If I (or Nephi or Nephi's readers) did nothing, could I be saved? Obviously I cannot presume to speak for what God could or would do in all cases; his power is great enough to do so. However, the Book of Mormon repeatedly teaches that we will not be saved *in* our sins, only *from* our sins, and wherever that notion appears, invitations to do something also appear. Thus I do not agree that Jacob or Nephi or others "[leave] no room for the idea that something of our own efforts plays a role in saving us,"¹⁴ because if I do not do anything, then I am not being obedient to Christ's invitations, thereby I remain in a wicked, unclean state.¹⁵ Grace helps us turn to God and accept his invitations. Therefore, in that sense, grace is saving us because it is helping us along the way, but if it is *only* grace acting without any response on our part, then we have no agency in the process. When individuals are acted upon without first turning to God, such as Alma the Younger or Paul, it is a strong invitation to change course or they will be eternally destroyed. Despite the extreme act of grace of having this spiritual wake-up call, they then still had to do something to continue on the path of grace and salvation. Alone, we can never fully become worthy of reentering God's presence, but we have been commanded to do something, and grace will bless our lives and natures all along the return path to God's presence. If Jacob's teachings in 2 Nephi 10 are a source for Nephi's statement in chapter 25, it may be instructive to also see what Lehi, before his death, testified to Jacob earlier in 2 Nephi. Lehi did indeed teach that redemption comes in and through the Holy Messiah, "for he is full of grace and truth," and because he offers himself as a sacrifice for sin, he answers "the ends of the law." However, Lehi also emphasized that Jesus would only answer the ends of the law for those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit: "And unto none else can the ends of the law be answered" (2 Nephi 2:6–7). So there's a meeting point alluded to in Lehi's testimony between his teaching that no flesh "can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah" with the requirement that individuals humble themselves, show remorse, and believe in Christ: "They that believe in him shall be saved" (2 Nephi 2:8–9). Both Christ's actions and our admittedly meager responses are essential for salvation and satisfying the demands of justice, even if grace helps one to reach the necessary faith and repentant condition in the first place and all along the way.

The third article of faith teaches that all mankind *may* be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel. Because of Christ’s redemption, we are made free to choose good from evil and to act for ourselves and not to be acted upon (see 2 Nephi 2:26). Yet we have to make the choice, otherwise we risk being acted upon by the power of Satan. Lehi invited his sons in language similar to Jacob’s later teachings about avoiding the power of the devil and the flesh: “I would that ye should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit; And not 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 2:28–29).

Conclusion

As mentioned, exploring “all we can do” today is likening or making application of this passage from 2 Nephi 25:23, whereas its original sense and meaning point toward the relationship between grace and the law of Moses. It seems in Nephi’s closing words of counsel before his death, he wanted to go beyond the law of Moses but was restrained: “This is the doctrine of Christ, and there will be no more doctrine given until *after* he shall manifest himself unto you in the flesh. And when he shall manifest himself unto you in the flesh, the things which he shall say unto you shall ye observe to do. And now I, Nephi, cannot say more; the Spirit stoppeth mine utterance, and I am left to mourn because of the unbelief, and the wickedness, and the ignorance, and the stiffneckedness of men” (2 Nephi 32:6–7; emphasis added). Thus Nephi is reminded that what he already has is all that he and his descendants *can do* until after Christ appears to them and gives them further doctrine and commandments. They needed to remain obedient to the law given them, and while doing all they could do to reconcile themselves to God, they had to remain humble enough to always remember that undoubtedly salvation came from grace through Christ. **RE**

Notes

1. Joseph M. Spencer, “What Can We Do? Reflections on 2 Nephi 25:23,” *Religious Educator* 15, no. 2 (2014): 25–39.
2. Spencer, “What Can We Do?,” 29.

3. Brad Wilcox's oft-cited devotional address on grace shares examples of this common perspective, see "His Grace Is Sufficient," *Brigham Young University 2011–2012 Speeches* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2012), 1–2, 5.
4. Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 91–92.
5. As Brad Wilcox has pointed out, we must be changed by grace, not just saved by grace. See Wilcox, "His Grace is Sufficient," 3.
6. "As these things are true" (2 Nephi 25:20).
7. Joseph Spencer also connects being reconciled with God to "all we can do" by noting a structural parallel between Jacob's teachings in 2 Nephi 10:24 and Nephi's in 2 Nephi 25:23. See *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012), 94.
8. This is in agreement with Brant Gardner's position in his commentary on this verse. "They should understand that their ultimate freedom from sin would come through the mission of the future Atoning Messiah. In the meantime, however, the sacrifices were required. These were 'all they could do.'" Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 2, 2 Nephi–Jacob (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 343.
9. The similarities between Nephi's and Paul's thoughts on the relationship of the law to Christ can be due to the similar Jewish background out of which they both originated. They were both observers of the law and then gained greater insight on the law's relationship to Christ's mission. In Paul's case, after gaining knowledge of Christ through his conversion experience, he was no longer bound under the law due to Christ's fulfillment of it; but in Nephi's case, he continued to live under the law despite his better understanding of its purpose.
10. It may be analogous to how many early Christians lived and taught (and how some contemporary Christians continue to believe): they knew Jesus had come as the Messiah, but not everything had changed or was accomplished with his divine mission. Thus they were still living in "this world" but looking forward to "the world to come," when Christ would return and fulfill all that he was supposed to do. Their belief and faith changed with his first coming and affected how they lived, even though they awaited the complete fulfillment of Christ's mission.
11. Brant Gardner believes Nephi's statement in 25:23 reconciles the conflict the faithful Nephites faced juxtaposing their belief in Jesus as the Messiah with Mosaic traditions. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 343.
12. *Noah Webster's 1828 American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. "reconcile."
13. Compare with Elder Oaks's statement on this principle: "Because of what He accomplished by His atoning sacrifice, Jesus Christ has the power to prescribe the conditions we must fulfill to qualify for the blessings of His Atonement. That is why we have commandments and ordinances. That is why we make covenants. That is how we qualify for the promised blessings. They all come through the mercy and grace of the Holy One of Israel, 'after all we can do'" (2 Nephi 25:23). From "Two Lines of Communication," *Ensign*, November 2010, 84. See also his earlier statement: "Some Christians accuse Latter-day Saints who give this answer of denying the grace of God through claiming they can earn their own salvation. We answer this accusation with the words of two Book of Mormon prophets. Nephi taught, 'For we labor diligently . . . to persuade our children . . . to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do' (2 Ne. 25:23). And what is 'all we can do'? It surely includes repentance (see Alma 24:11) and baptism, keeping the commandments, and enduring to the end. Moroni pleaded, '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’ (Moro. 10:32). We are not saved *in* our sins, as by being unconditionally saved through confessing Christ and then, inevitably, committing sins in our remaining lives (see Alma 11:36–37). We are saved *from* our sins (see Hel. 5:10) by a weekly renewal of our repentance and cleansing through the grace of God and His blessed plan of salvation (see 3 Ne. 9:20–22).” From “Have You Been Saved?,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 56.

14. Spencer, “What Can We Do?,” 31.

15. Spencer does hold out the possibility, more in 2 Nephi 25:23 than in 2 Nephi 10:24, that human efforts can mobilize grace, but his emphasis is that grace does the actual saving (see “What Can We Do?,” 28). I could not agree more, but God does not force salvation upon us, so there seems to be the need for us to do something to come unto Christ in order to be saved. Thus grace saves, but only when we allow it. Some of it may be a question of semantics: What do we mean when we use the term salvation? While some may use it in the sense of general salvation from sin and death, others may be focusing on individual redemption. Ultimately, these two perspectives merge since an individual will only be saved from sin if they accept Christ, who has paid for sin. So even though Jesus has already paid the price, it is not a *fait accompli* for the individual unless the gift is accepted. Gerald Lund has also carefully pointed out a common misinterpretation of “salvation” as having to do with Christ’s unconditional blessing of resurrection, while only “exaltation” is living in the presence of God (conditional). However, the scriptures (e.g., D&C 6:13) usually use these terms synonymously. See Gerald N. Lund, “The Way Is Prepared from the Fall of Man, and Salvation Is Free,” in *Jesus Christ, Key to the Plan of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 92.