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## Gathering in the Last Days: Saved in Sheaves, Burned in Bundles

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Michael W. Middleton

**T**he great gatherings and subtle siftings by which God has separated grain from chaff in individual lives, and the wheat from the tares in the fields of the promised land, are as ubiquitous as any Book of Mormon themes. Such accounts are particularly poignant in its last four books, as centuries of sifting and gathering culminate in the destruction of two civilizations. While the Book of Mormon recounts the peace and progress of righteous societies in the promised land, it also records their descent into evil and their decline into oblivion. Both Jaredite and Nephite histories record numerous events that demonstrate the gathering power of God: the righteous united and readied for the heavenly harvest—the wicked fully ripened and gathered for destruction.

Yet the history of the American continent is only a preview of its future. Mormon's description of the Nephites' last days and Moroni's account of the Jaredites' destruction contain important parallels to the horror and the glory that will precede and accompany the second coming of the Savior Jesus Christ. Discussing the "subject of gathering," the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote, "It is a principle I esteem to be of the greatest importance to those who are looking for salvation in this generation, or in these, that may be called, 'the latter times.' All that the prophets have written, from the days of righteous Abel, down to the last man that has left any testimony on record for our consideration, in speaking of the salvation of Israel in the last days, goes

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directly to show that it consists in the work of the gathering” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 83; hereafter *TPJS*).

The Book of Mormon is the record of great gatherings, both to salvation and to destruction. Using the overlay of the parable of the wheat and the tares, we can contrast the Zion societies established when righteous individuals came to Christ with the destruction that befell millions of the wicked when they rejected Christ and turned their minds and hearts to do evil. This all has application to our day because the latter times and the last days will be seasons of gathering: the righteous will be gathered to safety and salvation while the wicked punish and destroy themselves amidst wars and calamities (Mormon 4:5). The principle of gatherings to salvation and to destruction in the promised land follows an important pattern that is best illustrated by the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:24–43; D&C 86:1–7). There are four main aspects to that parable: (1) separating the righteous from the wicked, (2) planting the good seed in a promised land, (3) introducing the tares, and (4) finally, gathering before the harvest.

### Out of the Midst of Wickedness: Sifting and Separation

In gathering his people the Lord always gathers the righteous by separating them out from the wicked, never vice versa. This distinction is important enough that the Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 13 corrects the King James Bible order of the Lord’s command to the reapers in verse 30 from “Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them” to read “Gather ye together *first* the wheat into my barn; and the tares . . . to be burned” (JST Matt 13:29; emphasis added). The Doctrine and Covenants clarifies and confirms this order: “Ye shall *first* gather out the wheat from among the tares, and *after* the gathering of the wheat, behold and lo, the tares are bound in bundles, and the field remaineth to be burned” (D&C 86:7; emphasis added).

Such siftings and gatherings are apparent throughout the Book of Mormon. The Jaredite record opens with a gathering for a wicked purpose—building the tower of Babel. Unworthy to be invited into God’s kingdom and unwilling to change their ways, the people in the days of the brother of Jared concocted their own ideas about exaltation. Inspired by Satan, “they attempted to build a tower sufficiently high that they might get to heaven” (Hel 6:28; see also Gen 11:4).

After observing for himself the misbegotten designs of his children (Gen 11:5), “the Lord confounded the language of the people, and swore in his wrath that they should be scattered upon all the face of the earth” (Ether 1:33). Yet, while the wicked were scattered and confounded, a colony of righteous individuals was gathered and led away from the others to the promised land because of their faithfulness. Under the direction of the Lord, the brother of Jared and his followers were separated from the confounding curse that fell upon the builders of Babel. From that day to ours, Babel, or Babylon, the ancient capital of Babylonia, has been a symbol of all that is corrupt and confused; specifically, it connotes the false religion of all schemes or denominations that promise an entrance into heaven which they cannot deliver.

Like the Jaredite account, Nephite history begins with a separation. The Lord commands the prophet Lehi to leave Jerusalem and journey into the wilderness. Gathered by God to be a “peculiar treasure” (Ex 19:5), the Jews had become workers of wickedness and worshipers of idols. Though dedicated to the Lord, Solomon’s temple had become like the tower of Babel—an edifice which pretended a relationship with deity it was incapable of providing. So egregious was Judah’s sin that Jeremiah declared it to be “written with a pen of iron and with the point of a diamond” on individual hearts and engraved on the horns of the temple altars (Jer 17:1). Jerusalem would be destroyed just over a decade later, but Lehi’s colony was gathered and spared, separated from the wicked, and led to the promised land because of their faithfulness.

Once recognized, God’s pattern of separating the good from the evil can be found in many places in the scriptures, including nearly every book of the Book of Mormon. Consider the following examples. Shortly after their arrival in the promised land, the Lord directed Nephi and the righteous to depart from his wicked brothers (2 Nephi 5). Warned of the Lord, Mosiah led his people out of the land of Nephi (Omni 1:12). Converted by Abinadi’s teaching, Alma the Elder prompted the believers to withdraw from Noah’s kingdom and to gather at the waters of Mormon; then, divinely “apprised of the coming of the king’s army,” the colony left their homes behind and began their own city (Mosiah 18:4–7, 34). The Anti-Nephi-Lehies, who were converted by the sons of Mosiah, hearkened to the Lord’s

commandment to leave the Lamanites and established a righteous society in Jershon (Alma 27:12–14).

Analyzing these examples and those of the colonies of Lehi and of the brother of Jared, we see three parallels. First, in each case a righteous people were warned by God, under the direction of a prophet, to separate themselves from the wicked. Second, in each case the chosen group was led into a “wilderness” where they were prepared and proven. As section 86 of the Doctrine and Covenants suggests, it is the tares that “choke the wheat and drive the church into the wilderness” (v 3). And, third, in each case the chosen people eventually received their rest in a promised land where they began to build a Zion society. The rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also followed this pattern; a series of siftings, gatherings, and journeyings in the wilderness led from New York through Ohio to Missouri. Unprepared to build Zion at that time, the Church passed through a series of purges and divisions. As a result, a colony of pioneers departed into the wilderness to endure a “little season” of chastening, growth, and refinement in order that Zion may be redeemed (D&C 100:13; 101:3–4).

Until Zion is redeemed, Christ will continue to separate the good from the evil, the righteous from the wicked. He who separated the light from the darkness at creation’s dawn will also divide the sheep from the goats during the final judgment (Moses 2:4; Matt 25:32). The shadow of Christ’s second coming could not be more clearly portrayed than it is by his Book of Mormon ministry; in the midst of calamities and destruction, the “more righteous” in the meridian of time were separated and spared (3 Nephi 9:13). Preserved through God’s catastrophic judgments, many of the “more righteous” later gathered to a temple site in the land of Bountiful where they became personal witnesses of the resurrected Christ (11:1–17).

### The Sower of the Seed

In the parable of the wheat and the tares, the sower of the seed is Christ himself (Matt 13:37) or the apostles who continued his work, acting in his name (see D&C 86:2); it is Christ who plants the people in a field that is his own—his to give and his to take away. The inhabitants of the promised land are not there by chance; individually and collectively they have been separated from others, brought

through a wilderness of testing, and planted in a land choice above all other lands. Expressing sentiments as applicable to us as they were to the Nephites or the Jaredites, Lehi taught, “There shall none come into this land save they shall be brought by the hand of the Lord. Wherefore, this land is consecrated unto him whom [the Lord] shall bring” (2 Nephi 1:6–7).

In many instances where wickedness prevails, the Lord covenants with the righteous and guides them to a land of promise where their inheritance includes the opportunity and responsibility to build Zion. Their land of promise is not taken away until they reject the promise of Zion and are fully ripened in their iniquity. Possession of a land of promise is always predicated upon hearkening to the voice of the Lord (Abr 2:6) and serving “the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ” (Ether 2:12).

Before they arrived in the promised land, the Lord revealed to both the Nephites and the Jaredites the blessings and correlative responsibilities associated with being gathered to the promised land. Expressing his “thoughts upon the land” that he would soon give the Jaredites, the Lord’s warning is forcefully redundant (Ether 2:15). Three times in four verses he repeats a vital couplet concerning the American continents: first, this is a choice land of promise; second, the inhabitants will be swept off if they become fully ripened in iniquity (vv 7–10).

Grave responsibilities are associated with being good seed planted in a promised land. The Book of Mormon reiterates more than a dozen times the idea that the American continents are a land choice above all other lands (1 Nephi 2:20; Ether 9:20); as Jesus taught, “Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required” (Luke 12:48; see also D&C 82:3). Because of the unparalleled opportunities and rich blessings extended to the righteous in the promised land, they incur the severest penalties if they rebel against their God. Alma taught that if his people, after being “highly favored . . . of the Lord,” transgressed contrary to the light and knowledge which they had received, “it would be far more tolerable for the Lamanites than for them” (Alma 9:20, 23). He admonished his people to repent, reminding them that “the Lord expressly promised and firmly decreed, that if ye will rebel against him that ye shall utterly be destroyed from off the face of the earth” (v 24).

The Lord extended three promises to Nephi even before his family left the land of Palestine. If he were obedient to the commandments of the Lord, he would prosper in the land of promise (1 Nephi 2:20; 1 Nephi 4:14); he would be a “ruler and a teacher over [his] brethren” (1 Nephi 2:22); and he, and his righteous posterity, would never be under the power of their enemies (v 23). The blessings that the Lord promised to the Nephites have also been offered to the current inhabitants of the promised land—prosperity for the obedient (Omni 1:6; Mosiah 1:7), possession of a land of liberty (2 Nephi 1:7), freedom from the oppressive rule of others (2 Nephi 10:11; D&C 101:77, 80), and protection from foreign powers (1 Nephi 13:19; Alma 44:3–4). However, if we reject these promises and become fully ripened in iniquity, we will not escape the curses and judgments that befell the former inhabitants of the Americas.

### An Enemy Hath Done This: Opposition from Opposites

Satan always seeks to sow tares in the midst of the wheat on many levels—in the world, in the Church, in the family, and in individual souls. By describing the children of the wicked one as the tares (Matt 13:38), the Savior teaches a powerful lesson: while evil is the opposite of good, it often appears as a counterfeit. The father of lies has learned that one of his most effective schemes is to present what sounds and looks like the truth even though it lacks substance and authority. As defined by God, evil is anything that is either more or less than the doctrine of Christ (3 Nephi 11:40); it is just as destructive to look beyond the mark as it is to stop short of it (Jacob 4:14).

Without the aid of the Holy Ghost or the light of Christ, the natural man cannot distinguish the righteous from the wicked prior to the time of separation. Worthless tares and wholesome wheat seem identical until the harvest. Using words he gave to Malachi, the Savior taught the Nephites that prior to every time of separation many will call the proud happy, workers of wickedness will seem “set up,” and tempters of God will appear delivered. Not until the Lord of Hosts returns to make up his jewels in judgment “shall ye return and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not” (3 Nephi 24:14–18).

As in the parable of the wheat and the tares, the Lord is not the source of evil. The tares are sown among the righteous during his absence. The Lord, as the sower of good seed, permits the tares to grow with the wheat so that agency may exist, creating an arena of opposites where the righteous may earn their exaltation. Exaltation is not about appearance or association; as in other eras, eventually every shaft of grain in the promised land will be judged on its own merits. Neither tithing receipts, temple marriages, nor Church membership can save those who choose to be gathered into Satan's fold. We can claim only one name; only one shepherd can seal us his (Mosiah 5:14–15; Alma 34:35).

Mormon taught the Saints of his day that they were either a good or a bitter fountain. Certainly there are different degrees of bitterness, but the dichotomy is complete and discrete: a servant of the devil cannot follow Christ, neither can a follower of Christ be a servant of the devil (Moroni 7:11). Even actions that appear to be righteous, such as saying prayers or offering gifts to God, are not counted as acts of righteousness if they are not done with real intent (v 6). In fact, "A man being evil cannot do that which is good"; faithless and grudging efforts leave both the individual and his acts "counted evil before God" (vv 6, 8–9). Consider Cain's offering; the same Satan commands and the same consequences await in our day (Moses 5:18–24).

And so Satan revels in his role as the creator of counterfeits and the father of lies. The rejection of his offer in the premortal council has not weakened his resolve. Since shrieking at Moses "I am the Only Begotten, worship me" (Moses 1:19), he has not slackened his efforts to substitute priestcraft for priesthood, to supplant love with lust, and to replace true worship with idle ritual. Fittingly, Nephi classifies the church of the devil as a "harlot," for while the lips of Satan's servants may claim a relationship with the bridegroom, their hearts are far from him. Though they may perform the ordained duties of the Church of the Lamb—for money—their actions are always without authority.

Such is the sum and substance of apostasy: false claims of authority, perverted doctrines, the modification or deletion of saving ordinances, and the introduction of paid ministers. Prophesying of our day, Moroni decried the universal apostasy of "every one" of the pre-restoration churches; they had become polluted by pride, priestcraft, and perversions (Mormon 8:31–41). Although he had "sup-



posed not to have written more” (Moroni 1:1) after abridging the Jaredite record, Moroni devotedly uses his own book in the Book of Mormon to attempt to repair the effects of the great apostasy he had predicted. It is hard to imagine a more concise cure for the ills of apostasy than the content of the book of Moroni. Chapters 2 and 3 describe how the Nephite apostles received their authority and the manner by which priests and teachers were ordained in the true Church. Chapters 4 and 5 describe the ordinance of the sacrament, including verbatim records of the sacramental prayers. And chapter 6 gives instructions concerning church meetings and how repentant individuals were accepted for baptism and fellowshipped into the Church. Writing to our day, Moroni concludes his book with two epistles written by his father, Mormon, and with his own explanation of the long-absent gifts of the Spirit (Moroni 10:8–19). Certainly Mormon spoke and wrote many things, but Moroni chose to include his father’s doctrinal exposition on how to use the Spirit of Christ to judge between good and evil (Moroni 7) and his epistle against infant baptism (Moroni 8).

Nothing could be more important to the inhabitants of the promised land in the last days than to be able to distinguish between good and evil. Foretelling the signs preceding his second coming, the Savior explained that there would arise “false Christs, and false prophets,” who would show such great signs and wonders “that, if possible, they shall deceive the very elect, who are elect according to the covenant” (JST Matt 1:22). Though both the power of God and the influence of Satan will grow in this last dispensation, distinguishing between them will not necessarily become easier. Speaking “against the devil” in the 1987 October general conference, Elder James E. Faust taught, “We will witness increasing evidence of Satan’s power as the kingdom of God grows stronger. . . . In the future the opposition will be both more subtle and more open” (33). Trying to prepare us against this time of shifting standards and subtle deceptions, President Ezra Taft Benson has exercised keys held only by the living prophet on our behalf. Speaking in the April 1986 general conference, he said: “Now, in the authority of the sacred priesthood in me vested, I invoke my blessing upon the Latter-day Saints and upon good people everywhere. I bless you with increased discernment to judge between Christ and anti-Christ. I bless you with increased power to do good and to resist evil. I bless you with increased *understanding* of the

Book of Mormon” (78). These three specific blessings bestowed by a prophet of God—increased discernment, wisely-exercised agency, and improved understanding of the Book of Mormon—are related necessities for survival in the last days.

### The Great Gatherings: Saved in Sheaves, Burned in Bundles

Before the destruction of any people, Christ and his servants always gather all who are worthy and willing unto salvation. Satan claims all those who reject the name of the good shepherd (Mosiah 5:9–10). When those invited to come unto him refuse his willing arms, the Savior sorrows. Before leaving mortality, Christ wept over Jerusalem: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered thy children together . . . and ye would not!” (Matt 23:37). Similar sentiment flows from the words of the master of the vineyard recorded in Jacob chapter 5: “What could I have done more in my vineyard? Have I slackened my hand, that I have not nourished it? Nay . . . I have stretched forth mine hand almost all the day long, and the end draweth nigh” (v 47).

When the field is fully ripe, the wheat is gathered into the master’s barn, and then the tares are destroyed. During the slow process of ripening in iniquity that precedes the rapid harvest, servants of the Lord always warn all those with ears to hear of the impending judgments; no people is ever destroyed without ample warning from the Lord. Concerning the Jews, Nephi taught, “Never hath any of them been destroyed save it were foretold them by the prophets of the Lord” (2 Nephi 25:9). Once righteous, two great civilizations on this continent declined until they labored in iniquity. In each instance, they rejected and persecuted the prophets and servants the Lord sent until he withdrew them (Ether 13:22; Mormon 8:10). Deceived by Satan, these two societies were hardened and past feeling when chastened by the hand of God (Mormon 9:20; D&C 43:23–26). Eventually, even the Lord’s Spirit ceased striving with them (Mormon 5:16; Ether 15:19) and destruction was unavoidable and immediate. To paraphrase Samuel the Lamanite, their falling and rejection was made sure (Hel 13:37–38; Ether 14:25).

To a civilization fully ripened in iniquity, judgment and destruction become the kindest gifts God can give; once decreed, such judgments come quickly (D&C 99:5). The Jaredites' war of extinction was "swift and speedy" (Ether 14:22); likewise, the Nephites were swept off the land before the Lamanites "even as a dew before the sun" (Mormon 4:18). Either of these Book of Mormon civilizations could have been described by Jeremiah's lament over Judah, "Destruction upon destruction is cried; for the whole land is spoiled: suddenly are my tents spoiled, and my curtains in a moment" (Jer 4:20). Although divine destruction is rapid, it is never slipshod. Unquestionably, God has the power to take one and leave another in any circumstance (Matt 24:40–41), and often the righteous are spared. However, at times the Lord does not stretch forth his hand to protect his people from suffering or even death (see Alma 14:10–11), if such circumstances allow the wicked to be punished and the righteous to enter into his rest (Alma 60:12–13; *TPJS* 34). Also indicative of God's discretion in destruction is the way that two or more witnesses are always left to attest to his justice in judgment.

When the Jaredites were fully ripened in their iniquity, the final "gatherings" began. In spite of the warnings of prophets (Ether 7:23; 11:20) and their growing, obvious peril, every citizen of this greatest of all nations (1:43) was gathered to destruction. With hardened hearts and blinded minds, the Jaredites still spent "four years gathering" for battle even after the deaths of "two millions" of Coriantumr's mighty men (15:14). In the end, the names of leaders such as Shiz, Lib, and Coriantumr were little more than threads by which bundles of tares were bound before the burning.

After three generations of righteous wheat were gathered into the rest of the Lord, the remaining Nephites ripened in iniquity. Mormon mentions the gathering of the Nephites into one body as early as 327 AD: "We did gather in our people as fast as it were possible" (Mormon 2:7). After 58 years of fighting and fleeing, all the while striving to "gather in our people as much as it were possible, that perhaps we might save them from destruction" (v 21), the Nephites gather one final time. "And I, Mormon, wrote an epistle unto the king of the Lamanites, and desired of him that he would grant unto us that we might gather together our people unto the land of Cumorah, by a hill which was called Cumorah" (Mormon 6:2).

There can be no land of promise for mortals who will not keep their covenants. After Enoch and his city were gathered into the heavenly barn and this land was cleansed of all with whom the Spirit had ceased to strive, the American continents “became a choice land above all other lands, a chosen land of the Lord”; God decreed that all who inhabited this promised land shall serve him or they will fall (Ether 13:2). The Jaredites came, but several thousand years later the Lord of the vineyard reluctantly removed the once mighty tree that then “cumbered this spot of land” (Jacob 5:44). Later, the Nephites abandoned Zion’s united order of “no contentions and disputations” (4 Nephi 1:2) for a world “without order and without mercy” (Moroni 9:18) where the only things combatants had in common were hearts equally filled with hate and hands similarly stained with blood. Three times the Lord has cleansed the promised land; each day we are determining, both collectively and individually, how extensive the fourth purging will be.

The Book of Mormon is the record of great gatherings: the righteous gathered to lands of promise and the wicked gathered to destruction. However, both the Jaredite and Nephite prophets promise that a series of separations will occur as the Lord waits for the wheat and the tares to grow until the harvest. This pattern of great gatherings will be a characteristic of the last days until the second coming of Christ. Collectively and individually we are each, unavoidably, being gathered. The scriptures powerfully suggest that there are gatherings for which we will want to prepare ourselves and others we should plan to avoid, for Adam-ondi-Ahman will be as real as Armageddon.

The righteous will be gathered to stakes of Zion, while the wicked gather to battle among themselves and against the kingdom of God. Physically and spiritually, both Christ and Satan will assemble their hosts for the battle that will end what the war in heaven began. Armed with “truth . . . out of the earth,” the Church of God will grow as we use the Book of Mormon to “gather [the Lord’s] elect from the four quarters of the earth, unto a place which [he] shall prepare” (Moses 7:62). The Book of Mormon is the great gathering and sifting tool of the last days.

Meanwhile, the followers of Satan will assemble in evil armies and secret combinations that will overtly and covertly “make war with the saints” (Rev 13:7). These two groups will continue to polarize the earth’s population until the words of the First Presidency’s declaration

of 1845 are fulfilled, “As this work progresses in its onward course . . . no king, ruler, or subject, no community or individual, will stand *neutral*. All will at length be influenced by one spirit or the other; and will take sides either for or against the kingdom of God” (*Messages of the First Presidency* 1:257).

In spite of all that the world knows of the last days, all that we fear and all that we anticipate, we will be gathered—some to majestic glory and some to sudden destruction. The great gatherings of the last days are imminent, neither our ignorance nor our trepidation will slow their arrival. But each of us determines where he or she will be found; we individually determine the direction of our destiny. Nearly 2,000 years ago, on the day the resurrected Christ appeared on the American continent, it was not by chance that “there were a great multitude gathered together, of the people of Nephi, round about the temple which was in the land Bountiful” (see 3 Nephi 11:1; Ether 12:7). It is not coincidence that those worthy souls were conversing about Jesus Christ at the very moment of his coming.

The Book of Mormon, the most beautiful and the most correct of any book on the earth, provides the perfect template for the second coming of the Savior. For if we desire to meet him when he comes again, we must endure the sifting that will precede his appearance to the world. Each day we are choosing either the barn or the burning. As we select our associations for the approaching harvest that will accompany the Lord’s return, it will not be enough to bask in our lighted vessels; eventually we must each climb the high mountain where, at great length and through great effort, we too will hear and see and know for ourselves (3 Nephi 11:14–15). To prepare for the harvest, we must gather to stand in holy places and separate ourselves from the world. In our closets, our secret places, and our wildernesses, we must come to know Him whom all the world one day shall see. For in that moment, when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is the Lord (Philip 2:10–11), some knees will need no practice and some lips will recite words that are willing and familiar. To be gathered into the celestial fold, we must each depart from Babylon, live worthy of the promises of the promised land, distinguish between the wheat and the tares, and do all in our power to establish Zion.

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