

## *Their “Best Shots”*

DONOVAN FLEMING

**M**y brothers and sisters, I am both honored and humbled by the invitation to speak to the BYU community in a devotional assembly. I appreciate this opportunity to bear my witness of the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ and the reality of the restoration of his gospel.

The 27th of this month will mark the anniversary of the martyrdom of the Prophet of the Restoration. The day will pass quietly, but the impact of his ministry continues to be felt throughout the world. Each member of the Church, as a product of the Restoration, is a benefactor of his sacrifice, and we reverence Joseph Smith for the great work he brought to pass as the Lord’s prophet. As John Taylor wrote:

*Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it. In the short space of twenty years, he has brought forth the Book of Mormon, which he translated by the gift and power of God, and has been the means of publishing it on two continents; has sent the fulness of the everlasting gospel, which it contained, to the four quarters of the earth. [D&C 135:3]*

Relative to the translation of the Book of Mormon, in section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord said:

*Commandments were given to Joseph Smith, Jun., who was called of God, and ordained an apostle of Jesus Christ, to be the first elder of this church. . . .*

*And gave unto him commandments which inspired him;*

*And gave him power from on high, by the means which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon;*

*Which contains a record of a fallen people, and the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and to the Jews also;*

*Which was given by inspiration, and is confirmed to others by the ministering of angels, and is declared unto the world by them —*

*Proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old;*

*Thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever. [D&C 20:2, 7–12]*

Included in the introduction to the Book of Mormon is this statement by Joseph Smith:

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*Donovan Fleming was a BYU professor of psychology and an adjunct professor of -religious education when this devotional address was given on 17 June 1997.*

*I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.*

[Book of Mormon, Introduction; also HC 4:461]

In my own reading of this “most correct book,” I have been impressed with the understanding and great strength of the prophets of Book of Mormon times. I have many heroes who come from the ranks of these prophetic authors. One time, at a missionary zone conference, I was discussing the various Book of Mormon prophets and commented that as they came to the close of their ministries, “they gave it their best shot.”

For the remainder of my remarks, I would like to examine some of these “best shots” given to us by means of the translation of this marvelous book by Joseph Smith. I cannot be exhaustive, of course, and may miss citing some of your favorite passages.

It is interesting that for years the Book of Mormon was introduced by missionaries to their investigators with little more than a reference to Moroni’s promise. Currently, reading passages from the Book of Mormon is standard practice, and this book has become one of the great missionary tools of the Church.

We speak often about the gospel of Jesus Christ and how it provides meaning to our lives. Nephi had a clear vision of the plan of salvation and the doctrine of Christ and felt an urgency to ensure that his audience did not have a fragmentary understanding. He wrote:

*And now I, Nephi, make an end of my prophesying unto you, my beloved brethren. And I cannot write but a few things, which I know must surely come to pass. . . .*

*Wherefore, the things which I have written sufficeth me, save it be a few words which I must speak concerning the doctrine of Christ; wherefore, I shall speak unto you plainly, according to the plainness of my prophesying. [2 Nephi 31:1–2]*

In the next verses Nephi details the doctrine or gospel of Christ in plainness five times. In one version he wrote:

*Wherefore, my beloved brethren, can we follow Jesus save we shall be willing to keep the commandments of the Father?*

*And the Father said: Repent ye, repent ye, and be baptized in the name of my Beloved Son.*

*And also, the voice of the Son came unto me, saying: He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost, like unto me; wherefore, follow me, and do the things which ye have seen me do.*

*Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I know that if ye shall follow the Son, with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent, repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ, by baptism—yea, by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water, according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost; yea, then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost. [2 Nephi 31:10–13]*

He states further:

*And now, my beloved brethren, I know by this that unless a man shall endure to the end, in following the example of the Son of the living God, he cannot be saved. . . .*

*And now, behold, my beloved brethren, this is the way; and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God. And now, behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. [2 Nephi 31:16, 21]*

The doctrine of Christ in its simplicity is to be baptized by water and by fire and the Holy Ghost and to endure to the end. Nephi clearly wanted us to understand the importance of following Christ into the waters of baptism that

we may be cleansed by the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost. Concerning enduring to the end, Elder Hartman Rector, Jr., while touring our mission, said that enduring to the end has three dimensions: (1) repent continually; (2) forgive others; and (3) be nice. Because of a busy schedule, we didn't have the opportunity to discuss what being nice entails, and I can only speculate what it might be, but I assume that being nice encompasses all of the commandments. Perhaps it is as the Lord has counseled us to be: loving, gentle, meek, long-suffering, and free of hypocrisy and guile.

Missionaries frequently encounter contacts who say, "I've heard about your 'Mormon Bible.' As far as I am concerned, the Holy Bible is the only true word of God, and you can't tell me anything that will change my mind." As Nephi was concluding his ministry, he anticipated that there would be resistance to an acceptance of any "new" scripture and recorded the words of the Lord in this manner:

*And because my words shall hiss forth—many of the Gentiles shall say: A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible. . . .*

*Thou fool, that shall say: A Bible, we have got a Bible, and we need no more Bible. Have ye obtained a Bible save it were by the Jews?*

*Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea; and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth?*

*Wherefore murmur ye, because that ye shall receive more of my word? Know ye not that the testimony of two nations is a witness unto you that I am God, that I remember one nation like unto another? Wherefore, I speak the same words unto one nation like unto another. . . .*

*And I do this that I may prove unto many that I am the same yesterday, today, and forever. [2 Nephi 29:3, 6–9]*

It was brought to my attention by a missionary that an application for employment at a large firm in one of the major cities of the mission had this question: "Do you believe in any scripture other than the Holy Bible?" A yes answer was the kiss of death as far as being hired by that firm. One who has a witness of the restoration of the gospel asks: "Why is it so difficult for so many to set aside their unfounded prejudices and misunderstandings and cleave to the word of the Lord?" We shall yet see additional scripture to enlarge our understanding of spiritual things as the Lord makes his word available to us. In compiling the Articles of Faith, Joseph Smith wrote: "[God] will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God" (Articles of Faith 1:9). As the Lord sees fit to open the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon, what great scriptural adventure lies ahead of us?

The word *scripture* refers to writings recognized by the Church as sacred and inspired, revealed under the influence of the Holy Ghost. In closing out the writings of his father Mormon, Moroni was not to be misunderstood:

*And again I speak unto you who deny the revelations of God, and say that they are done away, that there are no revelations, nor prophecies, nor gifts, nor healing, nor speaking with tongues, and the interpretation of tongues;*

*Behold I say unto you, he that denieth these things knoweth not the gospel of Christ; yea, he has not read the scriptures; if so, he does not understand them.*

*For do we not read that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and in him there is no variableness neither shadow of changing? [Mormon 9:7–9]*

That God is the same yesterday, today, and forever is a recurrent theme in the Book of Mormon and in other scripture as well. I have selected these passages from Nephi and

Moroni—prophets who appeared both early and late in the Book of Mormon—to indicate that the teachings of these brethren were internally consistent and in tune with the mind of the Lord. Of course we expect consistency, since Alma, speaking to Corianton, tells us that with any inconsistency in the plan of salvation, God would cease to be God. Alma continues:

*But God ceaseth not to be God, and mercy claimeth the penitent, and mercy cometh because of the atonement; and the atonement bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead; and the resurrection of the dead bringeth back men into the presence of God; and thus they are restored into his presence, to be judged according to their works, according to the law and justice.*

*For behold, justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own; and thus, none but the truly penitent are saved.*

*What, do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you, Nay; not one whit. If so, God would cease to be God.*

*And thus God bringeth about his great and eternal purposes, which were prepared from the foundation of the world. And thus cometh about the salvation and the redemption of men, and also their destruction and misery. [Alma 42:23–26]*

It is impressive that Alma had a great depth of understanding of the Atonement and the Resurrection and the plan of salvation.

It was Alma whose great missionary zeal boiled over when he said:

*O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people!*

*Yea, I would declare unto every soul, as with the voice of thunder, repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth.*

*But behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; for I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me.*

Then, in a reflective moment, he goes on:

*Why should I desire that I were an angel, that I could speak unto all the ends of the earth?*

*For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, 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 29:1–3, 7–8]*

Alma has had his wish fulfilled. His words now flood the earth in many languages!

Few have been converted to the gospel in the same manner as Alma. Yet we can profit by his account of his conversion as he described it to his son Helaman. In particular, his account can lead us through the steps of repentance. He still had a vivid recollection of the events of his conversion but was troubled by his sins no longer. Alma related the story of his conversion by stating:

*I was racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sins.*

*Yea, I did remember all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell; yea, I saw that I had rebelled against my God, and that I had not kept his holy commandments.*

*. . . That the very thought of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror. [Alma 36:12–14]*

While he was in this state, he remembered hearing something his father had said concerning the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to atone for the sins of the world.

*Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son*

*of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.*

*And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.*

*And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain! [Alma 36:18–20]*

After manifesting to the people that he had been “born of God,” he said:

*Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.*

*Yea, and now behold, O my son, the Lord doth give me exceedingly great joy in the fruit of my labors. [Alma 36:23–25]*

We see that Alma went through a spiritual awakening that carried him from a glimpse of what it might be like in outer darkness to the joy of committing one’s life to continual service to the Lord.

When interviewing missionaries at the end of their missionary service, I asked: “What has impressed you most about serving a mission?”

Most often the response would be: “The change I saw in those who had accepted the gospel.”

Like the various dispositions of the seeds described in the parable of the sower, many would believe but not commit to baptism. But those who committed and were baptized did display remarkable changes. And those missionaries who patiently carried their investigators through the discussions and to the waters of baptism were firsthand observers of these changes—and there were lasting impressions. That we can repent and bring ourselves into full fellowship with the Lord is a tremendous

gift, a necessary step in becoming one with God.

Another convert who made a radical change of heart in Alma’s time was Zeezrom. Zeezrom “was a man who was expert in the devices of the devil, that he might destroy that which was good” (Alma 11:21). Zeezrom found himself in a cross fire between Amulek and Alma, and, after a period of purification not unlike Alma’s, he joined the Church, became a missionary to the Zoramites, and was seen as a source for good. Aminadab included Zeezrom when he said to the Lamanites, “You must repent . . . , even until ye shall have faith in Christ, who was taught unto you by Alma, and Amulek, and Zeezrom” (Helaman 5:41).

The record of Alma’s ministry is rich with gospel insights. The depth and breadth of Alma’s understanding is impressive and compelling. I have not mentioned Alma’s discourse on faith, but it combines with each of the other principles and ordinances of the gospel Alma discussed in the closing era of his ministry. In so doing he gave his witness to those who would listen that each of these principles and ordinances is fundamental to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

You will recall that Amulek, one of Alma’s missionary companions, gave an inspired discourse on the atonement of Christ to the Zoramites. In confirming Alma’s teachings, he said:

*And now, behold, I will testify unto you of myself that these things are true. Behold, I say unto you, that I do know that Christ shall come among the children of men, to take upon him the transgressions of his people, and that he shall atone for the sins of the world; for the Lord God hath spoken it. [Alma 34:8]*

It has been of interest to me to note that the word *atone*, or *atonement*, has frequent usage in the Book of Mormon but is used only once in

the New Testament. Speaking to the Romans, Paul said:

*For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.*

*And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement. [Romans 5:10–11]*

That Amulek had a keen awareness of the plan of salvation and the mission of the Lord was apparent when he said: “For it is expedient that an atonement should be made; for according to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish” (Alma 34:9). Such spiritual insights do not come without effort but rather from much prayer, fasting, and study in the same manner the sons of Mosiah obtained their understanding. Also, it probably didn’t hurt in the least to be the traveling companion of a prophet of God. As the Lord told Oliver Cowdery, there is a pattern for obtaining gospel knowledge, and it is not as if we can plop ourselves down on a rock and wait for a knowledge of the mysteries of God to be showered upon us. Listen to Amulek’s description of the Atonement:

*For it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice; yea, not a sacrifice of man, neither of beast, neither of any manner of fowl; for it shall not be a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice. [Alma 34:10]*

No one man can atone for the sins of another, but there must be a great and last sacrifice, and no one less than a god can make this sacrifice. Then, as Amulek indicates, there would be an end to the shedding of blood with the fulfilling of the law of Moses. In Amulek’s words:

*And behold, this is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal. [Alma 34:14]*

It is through the Atonement that mercy can satisfy the demands of justice. One who will exercise faith and will repent becomes the benefactor of the promise of the Atonement. The Lord indicates that he will remember our sins no more if we humble ourselves and repent. What a blessing it is that we can do so, if we do not sin unto death. On the other hand, if we will not exercise faith and will not repent, then we become exposed to the law of justice and must suffer even as Christ. When I read verses 15–20 of section 19 of the Doctrine and Covenants, it is clear to me that the Lord is not playing games. It doesn’t sound as if we could “eat, drink, and be merry; have the Lord beat us with a few stripes, and then have him let us enter into his rest” (see 2 Nephi 28:7–8). It is well for us to exercise our agency in a constructive manner and follow all the steps that lead us to eternal life. Amulek had a clear vision of the Atonement.

Many of the “best shots” recorded in the Book of Mormon come from counsel given from father to son. I have mentioned Alma’s discourse to Helaman. He in turn spoke to Shiblon and to Corianton. Shiblon was on track and received far less counsel than did Corianton. Alma proceeded to enlighten Corianton concerning some very fundamental gospel principles about which Corianton had meager understanding. Some of these principles included the absolute necessity of personal purity, the state of the spirit between death and resurrection, the probationary role of this life, and the relationship between spiritual and temporal death. His statement that “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10) is absolute truth. In Alma’s description of the Resurrection, he said:

*The soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul; yea, and every limb and joint shall be restored to its body; yea, even a hair of the head shall not be lost; but all things shall be restored to their proper and perfect frame. [Alma 40:23]*

Some of us take great comfort in this description of the Resurrection!

Others giving counsel to their sons at the close of their ministry include Lehi to his sons and the sons of Ishmael; Helaman to his sons Nephi and Lehi; and Mormon to Moroni. One can imagine the bittersweet feelings that Lehi had as he was preparing to lay down his tabernacle of clay. The knowledge that his eldest sons along with the sons of Ishmael had a bleak future brought great sorrow. On the other hand, the righteousness of Sam, Nephi, Jacob, Joseph, and Zoram brought satisfaction and joy. Lehi instructed the former group to “rebel no more against your brother” (2 Nephi 1:24) and told them that if they would pay heed to the voice of Nephi, they would not perish (verse 28). Lehi took this occasion to speak to them about the agency of man:

*For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so . . . , righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. [2 Nephi 2:11]*

He also told them that God “gave unto man that he should act for himself” (2 Nephi 2:16). He instructed his progeny about the fall of Adam and his connection to Joseph of old, and he prophesied that a seer by the name of Joseph would be raised in the latter days. In spite of all the training, chastening, and spiritual experiences of Laman and Lemuel, they were unresponsive. One can see how the adversary can canker the souls of men until they are past feeling. Nephi was shooting rifle shots when he indicated that Satan leads us carefully down to hell. To become past feeling

is not a process that occurs in a day; it is a slow, progressive process. One can wonder whether Laman and Lemuel were ever in tune with the Spirit; rather, they had their “hearts . . . set so much upon the things of this world, and aspire[d] to the honors of men,” as the Lord puts it (D&C 121:35), that they were frankly unable to respond to the “still small voice.”

Helaman’s sons Nephi and Lehi—like Jacob, the brother of Nephi—received their “errand from the Lord” and became stellar missionaries. Nephi vacated the judgment seat and, with his brother Lehi, preached the word of God the remainder of his days. In Helaman 5 there are many references to the instructions they received from their father Helaman. It was the desire of Helaman that they should keep the commandments of God and remember who they were—they even bore the names of their first parents who came out of Jerusalem. They were instructed further to remember the words King Benjamin spoke as he concluded his ministry (see Mosiah 2–5), in particular:

*Remember that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, who shall come; yea, remember that he cometh to redeem the world. [Helaman 5:9]*

It was Helaman’s witness that the Lord should surely come not to redeem mankind *in* their sins, but to redeem them *from* their sins. As the record details, Helaman spoke many things to his sons that are both written and unwritten. Nephi and Lehi realized great success and had many miraculous experiences. Their father had trained them well. These words of Helaman gave them the strength to stand steadfast in the face of adversity and to exemplify their convictions:

*And now, my sons, remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation;*

*that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall. [Helaman 5:12]*

There is one other father and son combination that I wish to mention—that of Mormon and Moroni. Mormon must have been an exceptional youth “at ten years of age” to be singled out by Ammaron to be given the future charge of the sacred records when he was “about twenty and four years old” (Mormon 1:2–3). Wickedness was rampant, and the great Nephite civilization was in decline, “tak[ing] happiness in sin” (Mormon 2:13). Knowing full well the destiny of his people, Mormon preached to them anyway. But he preached in vain. He even refused for a time to lead their armies, although he had previously done so with success. Day by day Mormon could see the numbers of Nephites becoming fewer and fewer. Knowing the end was coming, he hid the sacred records in the hill Cumorah. Watching the carnage that was being entailed on his loved ones, he reported:

*My soul was rent with anguish, because of the slain of my people, and I cried:*

*O ye fair ones, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord! O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you! [Mormon 6:16–17]*

Mormon’s record was finished by Moroni. Mormon had been killed, and Moroni remained alone to chronicle the destruction of his people. In closing his father’s record, Moroni wrote with the strength of his conviction about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. He said that if there are any faults in the book, they are the faults of men, and he

testified that God is a God of miracles and that he had prepared a way for the translation of the Nephite writings—through a modern prophet, as we know.

Following the abridgment of the book of Ether, Moroni had “not as yet perished,” and he wrote a “few more things” (Moroni 1:passim). The entire book of Moroni is his “best shot.” He describes the manner in which ordinances are to be carried out; details the accepting of new members into the Church; and gives a profound discourse on faith, hope, and charity. Charity, according to Moroni is the “pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him” (Moroni 7:47). In the closing chapters of his writings, Moroni cites counsel he has received from his father, Mormon. He quotes from letters written by his father, including this father’s blessing:

*May the grace of God the Father, whose throne is high in the heavens, and our Lord Jesus Christ, who sitteth on the right hand of his power, until all things shall become subject unto him, be, and abide with you forever. [Moroni 9:26]*

In his final chapter, Moroni indicates that he will seal up the records after he has given a few words of exhortation. He exhorts us to gain a witness of the Book of Mormon; to not deny the gifts of God; to remember that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever; and to hold fast to these things. It is his final exhortation that I wish to detail. He begins:

*And again I would exhort you that ye would come unto Christ, and lay hold upon every good gift, and touch not the evil gift, nor the unclean thing. . . .*

*Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may*

*be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.*

*And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot. [Moroni 10:30, 32–33]*

I wish to return to the description of the Book of Mormon given in section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants, where we read that the book is a record of a fallen people. A fallen people is a dead people, a lost civilization—a people who would not embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ and as a consequence lost their heritage. Although the Nephite people perished, the writings of great prophets who labored in their midst remain. In their final counsel they gave to us a clear picture of the fullness of the gospel. The translation of their

writings by a modern prophet gives us a witness that God does speak to men in this day and age as he did in days of old. What a blessing it is to have the writings of these servants of the living God to enlarge our understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

My brothers and sisters, I know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. I know for a surety that the Book of Mormon is the word of God, translated through the power of God by a living prophet. I know that the gospel has been restored in its entirety and that there has been a succession of prophets who have held and do now hold the keys of the priesthood for the administration of all the ordinances leading to eternal life. I sustain President Hinckley as a prophet, seer, and revelator with all of my heart and am grateful for the strength of his leadership. This Church is true. It is my prayer that we may heed the counsel of the prophets, both past and present, and that we may become holy, without spot, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.