In the first edition of the Book of Mormon, Alma 30–35 are one chapter (chapter 16). They can be outlined like this:

Korihor (30)

The Zoramites (31–32a; 35)

The poor in spirit (32a)

Faith and the Atonement (32b–34)

Separation of the Ammonites from Jershon (35)

This suggests that we should read these stories as a piece, as a story about how Alma deals with different forms of apostasy. Alma’s sermon in chapters 32 and 33, with Amulek’s response to Alma’s sermon, is the conclusion or climax of the story. Notice that the division between chapters 32 and 33 occurs in the middle of the sermon, breaking it up artificially. The result is that we tend to treat the two parts of the sermon as distinct things, but we shouldn’t. Notice also that Amulek’s sermon is a commentary on Alma’s, particularly in the beginning. Amulek tells us what Alma’s sermon was about. But we seldom read Alma’s sermon as Amulek does. That should give us pause.
Background

Remember what we have seen in our recent readings: The great battle with the Lamanites (Alma 28); Alma’s encounter with Korihor (Alma 30); Alma hears of the apostasy of the Zoramites (Alma 31), and fearing that the Zoramites will enter into a covenant with the Lamanites and come against the Nephites in war (Alma 31:4), he decides to go with others on a mission to convert the Zoramites because “the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword” (Alma 31:5); Alma prays for the success of his mission (Alma 31:26–35).

Too often we read Alma’s sermon out of context, truncating it and looking only at Alma 32:26–43 (if that much), ignoring that his sermon is a response to his encounter with the Zoramites and that it continues on into chapter 34 and is followed by a second sermon, a second testimony, by Amulek. The result is sometimes that we use it for our purposes, not mindful of what Alma is teaching. These notes will be longer than usual, but I will cover all of chapters 32–33, with references to chapter 34.

Alma 32

Verses 1–3: What are the various ways in which these people are poor? One is, obviously, monetarily: “they were cast out of the synagogues because of the coarseness of their apparel”; we can presume that they couldn’t afford the fine clothing necessary for worship. However, when Alma speaks of being “poor as to things of the world,” he means something else. What does he mean?

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What does he mean by “poor in heart”?

Verse 5: The man who comes to Alma tells him that “they are despised of all men.” Is he exaggerating? If so, why would he do so?

What might the phrase “our God” suggest? Is the man skeptical that his God is also Alma’s, or is he appealing to what he and Alma have in common?

As you read what follows, ask yourself what kind of worship the questioner and his comrades were asking to take part in. (See Alma 31:12–18, 23.)

Verse 7: It is odd to feel joy in the suffering of another. In fact, it is often a kind of denial: it’s all right that we suffer here because this world isn’t anything anyway. But Latter-day Saints believe that this world is something, just as we believe that our bodies are important. So even while we look to eternal reward, we ought not to dismiss this world, or the suffering of this world, as nothing. So what are we to make of Alma’s joy?

Alma says that they are prepared to hear the word. Then later, when Amulek speaks, he says that Alma spoke to them “to prepare [their] minds” (34:3). If Alma’s sermon was merely preparatory, what did it prepare them for? Amulek’s sermon? Something else?

Verses 7–11: Alma identifies the man’s question: “What shall we do—for we are cast out of our synagogues?” He responds with two rhetorical questions. How do those questions answer their question? Why isn’t this the end of Alma’s sermon?

What beliefs were characteristic of the Zoramites? (See Alma 31:24–28; 31:29). Would those beliefs have been influential with the poor among the Zoramites?
Verse 12a: What does Alma think they should have been asking him?

As you read the rest of Alma’s sermon, ask yourself how he is teaching them wisdom and why humility is necessary to learn it.

Verses 12–13: Are we blessed if we are humbled against our wills? Why would we be given mercy if our humility was imposed on us?

Verses 14–15: If even those who are humbled against their wills are blessed, why is it better to humble oneself?

Verse 17: Surely Alma is thinking of Korihor here. Why would that comparison be useful to the Zoramites?

Verse 18: We use the word faith in a few senses: sometimes to mean “fidelity” but most often to mean “trust” or “belief in the face of uncertainty.” Alma seems here to ignore the fact that the word can have multiple senses. Why might he do that?

Verses 19–20: Alma asks them to decide whether the person who knows and doesn’t do is worse than the person who only believes and doesn’t do. Why must they decide? Doesn’t he tell them the answer in the last clause of verse 20?

Verse 21: Alma recognizes that he has gotten off topic (verses 19–20), and he returns to the topic of faith. Why does he contrast faith and perfect knowledge rather than just faith and knowledge?

1. “12a” is a way of referring to the first part of verse 12. So “12b” would refer to the second half.
What does the word *perfect* mean as Alma is using it here?
In philosophy we often use the metaphor of vision to talk about knowledge: to know something is to see it; to be true is to be visible. Is Alma thinking in the same way or in another way?

**Verses 22–23:** Why does Alma think it important to remind them of these things early in his sermon?

How is what he says here relevant to his own experience?

Was Alma’s experience with the angel enough to give him knowledge? (Compare Alma 5:45–46.)

What does the word *confound* mean as it is used here?

**Verses 24–25:** Alma gets off topic again. In verse 21 he told us that he was going to discuss faith. What do you think caused him to return to (1) the question of what they could do about being cast out of the synagogue and (2) the topic of their humility?

**Interlude (Alma 34)**

Before reading Alma’s teachings to the Zoramite poor, it might be helpful to read Alma 34:1–5, Amulek’s description of what Alma did.

**Verses 1–2:** What does Amulek remind them about their background? Why is that important?

**Verse 3:** Why does Amulek understand Alma’s sermon as preparatory, and why does he focus on Alma’s exhortation to faith and patience? Would you have noticed that exhortation in Alma’s sermon if Amulek hadn’t brought it out? Why or why not?
**Verses 4–5:** How does Amulek understand the experiment that Alma is going to propose?

How can the great question be whether there is a Christ if the only thing they asked was how to get back into the congregation of the Zoramites? If their real question was whether there is a Christ, even if they didn’t know it, what does that tell us about how we should understand Alma’s sermon?

**Back to Alma 32**

**Verse 26:** Does *surety* here mean “certainty” or “security”? How might the differences in those meanings change our understanding of the verse? Is there any connection between those meanings and faith as trust, on the one hand, and epistemic uncertainty, on the other?

**Verse 27:** Webster’s 1828 dictionary says that *faculty* meant “1) that power of the mind or intellect which enables it to receive, revive, or modify perceptions; 2) the power of doing anything; 6) power, authority; 9) privilege.” Which meaning do you think is at work here? Why does Alma make desire the moving, most important force in this verse? Alma speaks of exercising faith, making faith an action. What does it mean to say that faith is something we *do*? Is that a way that faith contrasts with knowledge? Is knowledge an act?

**Verse 28:** Is it significant that Alma has shifted from his word (verse 27) to *the* word?

Alma uses the phrase “the word” considerably more than any other Book of Mormon prophet (over fifty times), and he uses it to refer to something other than the word of God.
only three times (Alma 19:9; 41:13, 15). To what does that phrase refer? (Compare Alma 16:16 and 33:22.)

Notice also how Amulek describes Alma’s teaching in Alma 34:6. As you read the rest of the first part of Alma’s sermon, the part about the seed and its results, keep in mind that he has begun by telling us specifically what the seed is.

Alma uses the passive voice to talk about the seed being planted in our hearts. Who does Alma understand to be doing the planting? Does this have anything to do with verse 22?

Alma uses the terms good and true as equivalents when he speaks of the seed. We usually use true and accurate as equivalents. What do you make of his usage?

How would Korihor have understood true? (Compare Alma 30:13–16.) What difference does that make?

At the end of the verse, Alma gives three characteristics of the good seed: it enlarges the soul, it enlightens the understanding, and it is delicious. Presumably these are parallel, three ways of saying the same thing. However, consider the metaphors he uses. What does it mean for a soul to be enlarged? If a soul gets larger, what else does it encompass?

Literally speaking, what does it mean for the understanding to be enlightened? What enlightens it?

Why would Alma describe the word as delicious? What does that suggest? Why does he say that the soul begins to be enlarged, the understanding begins to be enlightened, and the seed begins to be delicious?

How does one cast out the seed? What does that suggest about unbelief?
When Alma says “it will begin to swell within your breasts,” is your singular or plural?

**Verses 29–30:** Is Alma still using the word *faith* to mean an act, something one can do? What do we learn about the seed if we don’t cast it out?

**Verses 31–32:** The word *sure* means not only “without a doubt,” but “secure, safe.” Which of those meanings do you think is most important here?

**Verse 33:** Here Alma speaks of planting the seed rather than letting it be planted. Why do you think he may have changed his metaphor? What does it mean to know that the word—the seed—is good?

**Verse 34:** What knowledge is perfect?

Alma uses parallelism here: “Your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand.” How might the first half of this parallel help us understand what it means for our minds to expand?

**Verse 35:** Why might Alma have felt the need to address the question of whether the word is real?

Earlier (verses 28 and 34) Alma spoke of the word enlightening our understanding. Is this a continuation of that point?

Notice how consistent Alma is in identifying the true, the real, and the good. If we think in his terms, we would understand “the facts” to be what they are because they are what is good; we would understand that the good determines what is real. How would we see the world differently if we saw it in Alma’s terms?
What does it mean to taste light? Why does Alma keep returning to metaphors of taste?

**Verse 36:** Why do we need to continue to exercise faith once we know that the word is good?

**Verses 37–38:** If the seed is the word, what tree do you think Alma has in mind as the tree that grows from the seed that was planted? (Compare Revelation 2:7; 22:2.)

Notice that this is the first time that Alma has said that the seed is that of a tree. Is that significant to understanding how his listeners would have heard what he was teaching?

Verse 36 said that we need to continue to exercise faith. Is that how we nourish the tree?

Is it significant that we will say, “Let *us* nourish it” (italics added)?

What is the fruit of the tree?

Is *ye* in verse 38 singular or plural? What does the verse mean if it is singular? If it is plural?

If Alma had referred to the heat of the sun in verse 37, to what might he have been referring? Does it mean the same thing in verse 38?

Can what causes the tree to grow in our lives also kill it? How?

**Verse 39:** We already know that the seed is good (verse 33), so we can’t blame the death of the tree on the seed. What are the other possible explanations?

What does “your ground is barren” mean?
Verse 40: Alma tells us what tree’s seed was planted. Compare what Lehi (1 Nephi 8:10–12; see also 2 Nephi 2:15) and Nephi (1 Nephi 11:8–9 and the interpretation of the tree given in the rest of that chapter; see also 1 Nephi 15:22) say about the tree of life. What does Genesis tell us about the tree of life (2:9; 3:22)? Do Proverbs 3:18; 11:30; 15:4; and Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14 shed light on the tree of life?

Alma has spoken of the tree of life before (Alma 5:34, 62; 12:21–26). Do those earlier discussions shed light on what he is saying here?

The Book of Mormon never refers to the tree of knowledge, only to the tree of life. Why?

Compare Nephi’s description of the fruit of the tree of life (1 Nephi 8:10–12) with Eve’s description of the tree of knowledge (Genesis 3:6; Moses 4:12). Does that suggest an answer?

Verses 41–43: Why does faith require both diligence and patience? In the end, what is the point of the experiment on the word? What does Amulek identify as the point (Alma 34:3)?

Alma began with desire (verse 27); now he ends this part of his sermon with the satisfaction of desire. Has desire been a major theme of his discussion? If not, why begin and end with it? If so, why doesn’t the word appear more often in the body of the sermon?
Alma 33

**Verse 1:** What do the Zoramites desire? Have they understood what Alma has taught them? What is your evidence for your answer?

**Verse 2:** Does Alma answer the question that the people have just asked? Which question does he answer? It is as if they ask, “What shall we do about being cast out of our synagogues?” and he responds with a discussion of how to be nourished by the word of God. So then they ask how to obtain that fruit, the word of God, and he responds by answering their first question. What is going on? Why does he refer them to the scriptures?

**Verse 3:** Alma equates prayer and worship. Why?

**Verses 4–10:** Why is Zenos’s prayer particularly appropriate to the Zoramites? Notice the movement of Zenos’s prayer: wilderness → enemies → fields → house → closet → congregations → enemies. Is that a progression of some kind, perhaps from individual in the wilderness in the beginning to the congregation at the end? Why are enemies mentioned twice?

The first five in the series (wilderness → enemies → fields → house → closet) are separated from the last two (congregations → enemies) by verse 8 and its reference to God’s mercy. Does that suggest that we should treat the two groups distinctly in trying to understand the meaning of these verses?

How would you characterize each group?
Why does the explicit reference to mercy occur at the center of the prayer rather than at the end?

**Verse 11:** How do Alma’s concerns and the concerns of the Zoramites come together in this verse?

**Verses 12–14:** Why has Alma waited until this point in his sermon to appeal to the authority of scripture?

It is obvious from the way that Alma speaks with the Zoramites that they had the scriptures, though clearly they must not have accepted all of their teachings. What does that add to our understanding of the experiment that Alma has proposed to them?

**Verses 15–17:** Why did the people kill Zenock? How is *would* used in “the people would not understand”? What does that word tell us?

**Verses 18–19:** Why does Alma pile up the witnesses of Christ? How does his sermon compare, at this point, to his refutation of Korihor (Alma 30:40–44, especially verse 44)?

**Verse 20:** Why is this lesson important for Alma’s audience? What Alma says is very strong: ultimately those who do not believe the message of Jesus Christ do not believe because they refuse to believe. Does this have anything to do with his teaching from chapter 32 that goodness and truth are the same?

**Verses 21–22:** In the previous chapter, Alma used the metaphor of the seed. Now he uses the metaphor of looking around. What does this metaphor teach us about coming to know the truth—in other words, the good?
Verse 23: Alma returns to his metaphor of the seed, taking his audience back to the beginning of his sermon. Why does he feel the need to take them back to the beginning? Why does God make our burdens light rather than remove them?