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Title With Real Intent: A Priceless Gem

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Abstract Dadson shares his experience of gaining a testimony of the Book of Mormon while a young teenager at boarding school in Ghana. He was blessed through clean living, studying the Book of Mormon, and paying his tithing.



WITH REAL INTENT

A Priceless Gem

Andrew E. Dadson

Turning 12 was a milestone for me as far as discovering the Book of Mormon is concerned. Before then, any book of more than 20 pages terrified me. At this turning point, I started boarding school, where my faith was severely tested. In this surprising crucible of trials and hardships, delving into the Book of Mormon brought me enormous spiritual strength, and I discovered for the first time a gem whose luster would guide me for the rest of my life.

I was born in Ghana, West Africa, and grew up in a loving home with parents who revered the Lord and taught their children in his ways. When my Methodist parents became converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when it was introduced in Ghana in 1980, I was only five years old. We held regular family prayers and weekly family home evenings in which my parents shared biblical stories with us and encouraged us to keep the commandments of God. They taught us how to pray and exercise faith in the Lord at all times. Because our spiritual discussions centered more on the Bible than on the

Book of Mormon, when I left home for boarding school, I was not as well armed to defend my faith as I might otherwise have been.

Boarding school in Ghana at that time was in some respects a traumatic and daunting experience for a 12-year-old. It was customary for older students to bully junior students and make life unpleasant for them whether they had committed an offense or not. For instance, a freshman might be required to crawl 10 feet on a rough cement floor on his bare knees, or his food might be taken from him, no questions asked. Being treated this way and witnessing the trials of others provided me a glimpse of what life might have been like without the wonderful gift of agency. In our spiritual lives, our agency allows us to choose our own actions, but in secondary school, agency was not always an option without serious consequences: you either obeyed or you suffered punishment. Admittedly, my life in the boarding school was not always grim. In fact, the wonderful and memorable moments far outnumbered my dismal experiences. Moreover, I concluded that most teenagers view the painful experiences as merely a rite of passage into adulthood.



Andrew Dadson at home on vacation from boarding school.

My major challenge at boarding school was my interaction with students from varied backgrounds who were predominantly Catholic. The diverse student population consisted of youth from all over the country who spoke a number of dissimilar tribal languages. Fortunately, English, Ghana's official language and the school's language of instruction, unified us. While in secondary school, I was never officially persecuted or ostracized because of my religion, though occasionally my classmates and fellow dormitory residents made snide comments about my clean speech and aversion to drinking, smoking, and other

questionable activities. Never was I teased for reading the Book of Mormon. Rather, curious students would sometimes have me explain the origin of the book as well as my “peculiar” religious beliefs. I was amazed that any students had even heard of the church, let alone the Book of Mormon.

My secondary school was founded by Catholic missionaries in 1930 and was named after the famous archbishop St. Augustine. The school’s strict curriculum required that everyone attend early morning mass once a week and Sunday church service. I was not obliged to partake of the sacrament, or the body of Christ, as the Catholics call it; however, I learned a lot from the sermons preached and often wondered about the many differences and similarities between Latter-day Saint and Catholic beliefs and practices.

Some of the differences came to light occasionally, and sometimes the contexts were quite embarrassing. One day my ninth-grade teacher asked me to pray at the beginning of class. I said what seemed to me a beautiful prayer, making sure I followed all four steps that I had learned in Primary. I also addressed Heavenly Father respectfully with *thee*, *thou*, and *thine*. Immediately after I said “amen,” my teacher thanked me for praying and inquired, “How come you still use archaic pronouns in your prayers?” I was the laughing stock of the class that day.

I always kept a copy of the English version of the Book of Mormon in my suitcase. I didn’t have time to study it daily, but I read and thought about it often. I felt that the most important

weapon I had in my spiritual arsenal was this small blue book. For instance, when my friends inquired why I thought sprinkling was inadequate for baptism, I would read the words of Jesus Christ recorded in 3 Nephi 11:23–27 to answer them. Of course, since the Book of Mormon evidence was so clear on such points, they would often ask me to provide additional evidence from the Bible. We would argue back and forth until we came to a standstill. Encounters of this kind helped me to understand why Joseph Smith said, “The Book of Mormon [is] 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). The Book of Mormon provides concise and explicit responses to doctrinal questions, whereas the Bible seems contradictory on several topics, especially when read without modern-day revelation and the guidance of the Holy Ghost.

I certainly did not feel that the Book of Mormon made me superior to my Catholic friends, but I knew without a doubt that my scriptural foundation was much firmer than theirs. Unfortunately, until this point in my life, I hadn’t bothered to “experiment” on the word of God as Alma counsels us to do in Alma 32, or to “read,” “ponder,” and “ask” as Moroni exhorts in Moroni 10:3–4. Since my baptism at age eight, I had lived and thrived, or at least so I thought, on the borrowed light of my church leaders, teachers, and parents. I had assumed the authenticity of the Book of Mormon

and had not bothered to pray specifically for a spiritual confirmation regarding it. I did, however, pray often for strength to live the principles I continued to learn from the Book of Mormon.

A literal transformation occurred when I began to take seminary classes in ninth grade. My seminary teacher tried to come to my school once every two weeks. He was a very jovial and enthusiastic teacher who loved the Lord and showed it openly. He was a high school teacher and an athletic coach by profession, and he also ran a personal clothing business on the side. But even with his hectic schedule, he made time for us. One other Latter-day Saint student attended seminary regularly with me. We did not interact very much between seminary classes, because we had different academic emphases and dormitories. With packets for the entire seminary program available to us, we were never out of homework. For me, the wonders of the scriptures unfolded quickly. I simply loved seminary. Studying the scriptures was fun, and I looked forward to memorizing scripture mastery verses. My eyes lit up when I learned to cross-reference using the Topical Guide. Most important, I felt my soul expand as the Lord poured down knowledge upon me in a way that I had never before experienced.

A manifestation of this spiritual outpouring enabled me to connect and relate scriptural stories, chapters, and verses from not only the Book of Mormon but also from the Bible, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. For instance, I discovered a powerful correlation between 2 Nephi 2, 2 Nephi 9,

and Alma 34. Until this point, all I knew about the atonement was that Christ had died to make eternal life possible for everyone—the fall of Adam and Eve was an enigma, the need for an atonement was obscure, and the benefits of this unparalleled sacrifice were mostly evasive. But those chapters, read together, explained very clearly the advent of physical death and our spiritual alienation from God resulting from the transgression of our first parents. These passages threw a floodlight on the subsequent need for reconciliation with God through the atonement of Jesus Christ, and further, they established very clearly why Christ was the only qualified being to die on our behalf. Careful study of these chapters also taught me why the Savior voluntarily chose to suffer such an ignominious death and what the tragic consequences would have been otherwise. To me these passages were and are pivotal “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ” (Book of Mormon title page). Even today, each time I read these passages of scripture with real intent, I feel my testimony of the Savior resurge, and I am infused with gratitude for him and for all that he has done for humanity.

Slowly but surely, I worked through the seminary program and completed my initial study of the Book of Mormon. With this personal accomplishment—remarkable for me—I began to “wax strong in the presence of God” (D&C 121:45). I remember my father’s reaction very clearly when I told him that I had read every single verse of the Book of Mormon. “Really!” he retorted in utter disbelief. “That is incredible.”

But reading the entire book for the first time was only the beginning of what I expect to be a lifelong, intimate relationship with the most remarkable book the Lord has brought forth in our day.

At the completion of seminary, the natural thing to do was to put Moroni’s counsel into practice: to “ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true” (Moroni 10:4). After all, I wanted to know for myself, and asking Heavenly Father was the only requirement. When I finally prayed regarding the authenticity of the book, the Lord visited me through the warmth of the Spirit as if to say, “You’ve known this all along, my son.” With my stronger testimony of the Book of Mormon came a conviction of Joseph Smith as prophet, seer, and revelator—the first prophet of this last dispensation and the Lord’s instrument in bringing forth his church out of darkness and obscurity. My testimony of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its leadership was fortified. The plan of salvation provided answers to questions that had long perplexed me—where I came from, why I am here on earth, and where I will go after death. I understood and loved the principle of repentance. Further, I learned at this early age that walking with the Lord did not necessarily mean that our paths will be paved with gold at all times: trials, challenges, and temptations are an integral part of mortal life. The Lord’s words of encouragement to the sons of Mosiah apply to us as well: “Bear with patience thine afflictions, and I will give unto you success” (Alma 26:27).

My greatest challenge in high

school was yet to come. On 18 June 1989, I left school with the intention of attending worship services at a nearby Latter-day Saint meetinghouse. But instead of ushers in clean white shirts to welcome me, I saw policemen stationed there to inform members of a “freeze” the government of Ghana had imposed on our church services. This stunned me. Apparently, announcements of the action had been made over radio and television, but since I did not have regular access to these media at boarding school, I had not been notified. The government had mistakenly identified the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an intelligence group that was a threat to the stability of the country. This allegation was, of course, completely unfounded. But the sanction, which blatantly violated our constitutional rights, was to last for a year and a half. I was troubled and devastated for quite some time. However, my family and the Book of Mormon were a steady source of help and comfort.

During that time, I devoured the Book of Mormon as never before. As often as I could, I went home and read from the Book of Mormon with my family and partook of the sacrament in the comfort and safety of our home. We identified with the poorer class of the Zoramites who had been cast out of their synagogues “because of [their] exceeding poverty; and [they had] no place to worship [their] God” (Alma 32:5). We were comforted by the Spirit of the Lord and knew that, though we were cast out and despised by our enemies, the Lord heard our sincere cries in our afflictions (see Alma 33:10–11).



The Dadson family, left to right: Eileen, Sarah, Henrietta (mother), Kenneth, Alex, Andrew, Banyan (father), Barbara.

Our God did not turn his back on us.

After what seemed an eternity, in November of 1990 the ban was lifted. One unexpected benefit of the freeze was the public attention that the church received, evidenced by the influx of new members soon after the ban was lifted. We also experienced a stronger kinship and solidarity among ourselves—family members and church members alike. Generally, members felt fortified and more committed. The Lord had consecrated our afflictions for our gain (see 2 Nephi 2:2). Additionally, a number of my friends developed an unprecedented interest in my religious beliefs. A few friends invited me to explain my religious beliefs and standards to them. One Catholic friend in particular went home with me on a number of occa-

sions to attend our family church service. I believe that the principal deterrent to his becoming a Latter-day Saint was his age: as a minor in a Catholic school, he would have had to clear nearly insurmountable obstacles in order to embrace a new religion.

In retrospect, the Book of Mormon sustained me during this period through its stories and especially through the powerful testimony of the Savior it inspired in me. I developed a spiritual strength that made me feel almost invincible at times. My power to resist temptations and keep the commandments was magnified greatly. The Lord kept his promise to me: “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you” (John 14:18). And he did indeed come to me in a way that words are inadequate to describe.

A few years before the freeze in Ghana, in the Conference Report of October 1986, President Ezra Taft Benson, a prophet of the Lord, declared:

Is there not something deep in our hearts that longs to draw nearer to God? If so, the Book of Mormon will help us do more than any other book. . . . It is not just that the Book of Mormon bears testimony of Christ, though it indeed does that too. But there is something more. There is a power in the book which will begin to flow into your lives the moment you begin a serious study of the book. You will find greater power to resist temptation. You will find the power to avoid deception. You will find the power to stay on the strait and narrow path. . . . When you begin to hunger and thirst after those words, you will find life in greater and greater abundance. These promises—increased love and harmony in the home, greater respect between parent and child, increased spirituality and righteousness—these are not idle promises, but exactly what the Prophet Joseph Smith meant when he said the Book of Mormon will help us draw nearer to God.¹

I found fulfillment of the prophet’s words in every respect. When I was in the 11th grade and living on a meager allowance, I resolved to be a faithful tithe payer. I strongly desired to learn for myself the benefits of sacrifice: Lehi left behind his gold, silver,

home, and precious things (see 1 Nephi 2:4); King Lamoni's father was willing to give up all his possessions to know God (see Alma 22:15); and the Anti-Nephi-Lehies were willing to give up their own lives rather than take the lives of their attackers (see Alma 27:29). How much would I be willing to sacrifice to help advance God's work? My parents gave me the equivalent of about five dollars every month. They did not require me to pay tithing, but I craved the blessings the Lord extends to faithful tithe payers and resolved to put his promises to the test. As a result, he blessed me far beyond my expectations. For example, my final results for the British Ordinary Level Examination were among the best in all of West Africa. It was evident to me that studying hard for the examination was only one key to my success; the other was my eagerness to keep the law of tithing. The Book of Mormon played a crucial role in motivating me to live so as to receive the blessings that President Benson promised to all who seriously study the book.

By the time high school was over, so much had my testimony of the Book of Mormon and the

Savior increased that I knew a mission was right for me. My brief but very real acquaintance with the Book of Mormon had left me in awe of the magnanimity and love of our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. I had not talked to anyone previously about going on a mission. In fact, it was a big surprise when I announced it to my family. Education had always been the primary emphasis in my family, and it seemed illogical that with my good grades I now desired to take a different path, at least for a while. But I had made up my mind to devote two years of my life to telling people about the Book of Mormon and inviting them through its power to "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him" (Moroni 10:32). I will be forever grateful for the opportunity I had to serve the people in the Ivory Coast from February 1996 to March 1998. With each life I helped transform, my testimony grew. The small blue copy of the Book of Mormon worked miracles in changing habits, lives, and souls.

Several years have gone by since my initial acquaintance with the Book of Mormon at the age of 12. Now it has become my per-

sonal handbook. I read, ponder, and pray about it almost daily. What is amazing about the Book of Mormon is the literal power it offers to seekers of truth. Every single time I read it with real intent, hungering and thirsting to receive a spiritual confirmation, the Lord hears and answers me. The contents never grow old with repeated reading. In fact, it seems the words are reenergized each time I revisit them. While the other canons of scripture are also powerful, experience has taught me that the Book of Mormon brings one closer to the Savior faster. For me, it is truly another testament of Jesus Christ. The Book of Mormon promise—to bring us to Christ—extends to all: "He inviteth . . . all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33). The Book of Mormon will become a priceless gem to anyone who will diligently read it and subsequently strive to incorporate its teachings into his or her life. This precious gem will only glow brighter and brighter, illuminating that person's righteous path. ❏

[With Real Intent]

A Priceless Gem

Andrew E. Dadson

1. Ezra Taft Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 54; see *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, 7.