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# Mormon's Question

*Candice Wendt*

IN THE LAST CHAPTERS OF THE BOOK OF MORMON, the volume's final contributor, Moroni, copies into the text a sermon delivered by his father, Mormon. In the final chapter of the volume, Moroni adds to his father's sermon reflections a few of his own, building on the same themes. On my reading, what is sometimes called "Moroni's challenge," to come to know God's mercy through the witness of scripture (found in Moroni 10:3–5), is like the tip of the iceberg of a greater challenge expounded in Mormon's sermon and Moroni's further reflections. That challenge is best captured in Mormon's question addressed to the disciples of Christ in his own day: "How is it possible that ye can lay hold upon every good thing?" (Moroni 7:20). It is by this process of laying hold on every good thing, Mormon taught, that Christ's followers are to enter his rest, both in life and beyond the grave. And this is the challenge that concludes the Book of Mormon for every reader.

In the following few pages, I'd like to outline a series of theological reflections on Mormon's question. According to Mormon, the question of how to "lay hold" is essential to discipleship. Considering this and how little this process of "laying hold" is discussed, my aim is to raise it as a needed area for research and writing. I will make two moves in the following reflection on how the Book of Mormon conceives of the life of the disciple. First, I will focus directly on the question Mormon asks, looking at ways in which its very formulation is suggestive. Second, I will look at the answer Mormon ostensibly gives to his question, making clear the ways in which it might surprise close readers.

Mormon's question proves perplexing, which is the very reason he brings it to our attention. He in fact seems to anticipate skepticism about our task, indicated by the actual wording of the question. To ask *how* something is *possible* is not only to inquire about the steps of the process but to question whether it can be performed at all. The inclusiveness of the goal "every good thing" is weighty and seems to point us in many paths at once rather than the "straight, narrow" path of discipleship. I want to consider a few of the ways in which this inclusiveness or universality is suggestive.

First, geographically and culturally, vast fields await the disciple's search. The gifts of God, according to Moroni, "are many" (Moroni 10:8). "Every" good thing is included among Christ's gifts because "all things which are good cometh of Christ" (7:24). There are "divers ways" the gifts are administered (10:8). The gifts encompass all that provides and sustains life and happiness among a multitude of peoples, places, and creations, such that the "earth is full of the goodness of the Lord" (Psalm 33:5). To what extent might disciples need to journey into unknown territory in their searching? While there are limits to our energy and resources, how much more frequently might we need to be prepared to leave our houses, the lands of our inheritance, and our possessions and "[depart] into the wilderness" to lay hold of good things unknown to us (1 Nephi 2:4)? How might we deepen our searching, even without leaving home, by connecting with people of other cultures?

"Every good gift" also points us in a multitude of directions throughout time in relation to Christ's grace. What is our relation to Christ's gifts manifested in the past? From the beginning, Mormon teaches, God did "manifest things unto the children of men, which were good" (Moroni 7:24). Do gifts from the past continue to manifest themselves to us—and, if so, how? Are we to lay hold upon these also—and, if so, how? Moroni, among other prophets, taught the importance of laying hold on the words from the past, voices of the dead (see Moroni 10:27). How might we need to more deeply search knowledge from the past in order to open and enter the Lord's rest? How might family history work play into this? How might remembering Christ's sacrifice and

God's mercies to past generations be understood as laying hold of gifts of Christ? A "multitude" of Christ's "tender mercies" already manifest in the past await us, seeking to bear witness of him to strengthen our faith, as it did for Nephi (1 Nephi 8:8). Likewise, talk of "every good gift" turns us toward the future. How might the gifts we receive in the present be in preparation for the future, even if we "[know] it not" (D&C 35:4)? Gifts are without a foreseeable end; they are, according to Mormon, to continue to manifest themselves "so long as time shall last, or the earth shall stand, or there shall be one man upon the face thereof to be saved" on conditions of belief (Moroni 7:36).

A third point of consideration might focus on the different ways one might go about holding the gifts. What kind of tenacity or flexibility is best? Might different gifts require different handling—a firm grasp or even a cord to bind them to us (see Proverbs 3:3)? Using language similar to Mormon, Isaiah paints an image of lions "laying hold" of prey and bringing it safely home, which to me suggests God's fierce and trustworthy determination to fulfill covenants (see Isaiah 5:29; 2 Nephi 15:29). Lehi witnessed how tenacious holding to the iron rod is required to remain on the path of discipleship (see 1 Nephi 8:30). Firmness is virtuous. Yet we might wonder whether it is possible to cleave too tightly to certain gifts, deceiving ourselves or making certain gifts into idols. Paul in fact warns us of a danger like this, teaching that certain gifts are of greater value than others (see 1 Corinthians 12:31). Perhaps we should ask why *every* gift is needful. Is laying hold on Christ's gifts the only way to lay hold on Christ himself? "Hold me not," Jesus said to Mary Magdalene on his resurrection day, sending her to testify to others (John 20:17 JST). Are Christ's lights, words, and gifts like a medium of exchange substituting for himself? Do we wait for him to embrace us only at the end of the search?

To sum up these first points of reflection, considering the breadth of Christ's gifts and possible challenges to holding them, we might just ask Mormon's question again: "How is it possible that [we] can lay hold upon every good thing?" How can we cleave to so much during our relatively brief lives, and within our limited spheres of knowledge and

experience? Moreover, we might well be puzzled by how and why the search is the way to *rest*. These are active, labor-intensive tasks. Is it possible and necessary to rest from searching and holding at times?

Surprisingly, as he attempts to answer his own question, Mormon chooses to pass over anxieties about human incapacities, some of which have motivated these first reflections I've offered. Mormon asserts straightforwardly that the process of laying hold on good things is in fact possible—as witnessed by the fact that it has been performed effectively long before us by people belonging to previous generations. The key to laying hold, Mormon says, is faith (see Moroni 7:20–21). Faith is in fact the initial gift offered by Christ to lay hold of. This mustard seed moves mountains; faith bears up and counterbalances whatever the weight of the gifts, buttressing us to hold all others. Let me turn now, then, to a brief reflection on faith in connection with this theme of “laying hold.”

What should we have faith in as we lay hold on gifts? Not in the gifts themselves, nor in our strength to receive them, but in Jesus Christ. As Mormon articulates faith, we hear the words of God and his messengers and then exercise faith in Jesus Christ's sacrifice according to these words. This idea Mormon describes clearly: “Wherefore, by the ministering of angels, and by every word which proceeded forth out of the mouth of God, men began to exercise faith in Christ; and thus by faith, they did lay hold upon every good thing; and thus it was until the coming of Christ” (Moroni 7:25). Laying hold thus begins at our first demonstration of faith in Jesus Christ. Christ offers a central, singular gift, himself—which comes to us initially through the medium of the divine or angelic or prophetic word. All other gifts manifest and extend the sacrifice of Christ's life, his powers of redemption and resurrection. When we lay hold on faith in Christ's resurrection and redemption, we effectually lay hold on every good thing Christ brings into the world through his great sacrifice.

As Mormon and Moroni both make clear, laying hold of Christ's gift through faith opens a focused, continuous sequence in which we are to take his name and divine attributes upon ourselves. Our initial *faith* in

Christ leads us to *hope* for redemption. Hope fills us with “great views of that which is to come” (Mosiah 5:3; see Ether 12:4). Hearts softened by hope in Christ are perceptive and desirous of his gifts. *Hope* in Christ then leads us to *charity*. Hope’s vistas and joys lift burdens and bondage, liberating us to focus on loving others (see Moroni 8:26). Hope opens our eyes to better know the worth of souls and to receive Christ’s love for them. In its fullness, charity is to provide strength to bear up the full measure of Christ’s gifts and to abstain from all unclean gifts (see 7:45).

Might it be that every good thing manifest on earth is good because it manifests faith, hope, or charity in one way or another? Are these three gifts the only or principal tools we need to examine all things in “the light of Christ” (Moroni 7:18)? If we lay hold on these three gifts, have we already obtained every good thing? Since Mormon’s sermon on “laying hold” is also clearly a sermon on faith, hope, and charity, does it implicitly resolve in this way the problem of how to navigate and lay hold in a world and timeline that is saturated with Christ’s light and gifts? If so, how could we articulate this in detail?

Importantly, Mormon and Moroni warn us of the dangers of lacking faith, but they do so chiefly by warning us against the dangers of misjudging, denying, and rejecting the gifts of God. We need to turn judgments away and “condemn [the gifts] not” to become children of Christ (Moroni 7:19). Are we especially susceptible to denying the gift Mormon is most eager to obtain, namely charity? How often do we condemn or simply overlook charity as we walk the path of discipleship? Does it appear as an ugly or frightening creature? Can we see it at all? How does our incapacity to recognize and embrace charity for all manifest itself?

Could we say, finally, that Mormon’s challenge to lay hold of every good gift is primarily designed to prepare disciples to seek and obtain charity? How might we compare the process of laying hold to “cloth[ing] [our]selves with the bond of charity, as with a mantle” (D&C 88:125)? This connection might produce some answers as to why searching and grasping are to be our rest. Loving perfectly is bond and mantle at once. That is, it is first something that restrains and constrains us to be pure

and to keep working when we need to, but then it is also something that warms, protects, and exalts us. To love others perfectly is to have the cares and burdens of our minds lifted, to be encircled in peace that is resilient during hardship. How might charity lead us into what is now unknown wilderness to us? Is it through loving without bounds that we are to cleave to the multitude of all good things? Is laying hold more a way of being in the world rather than a particular journey?

Hopefully, these are questions enough to provoke interest in closer theological investigation of the concluding sermons in the Book of Mormon. The final appeals presented to readers in the book clearly bear on how this unique volume of scripture outlines the tasks of discipleship. If the Book of Mormon is to be taken seriously as a book of scripture, as a guide for the life of the spirit, these questions deserve closer attention.

**Candice Wendt** is an at-home parent of two young children in Redmond, Washington. She received an MA in comparative studies from Brigham Young University. Candice is interested in weaving new ideas for a better life using literature, philosophy, nature, and scripture. She gains inspiration while reading with children, participating in women's book clubs, connecting with neighbors from diverse cultures, and writing family history.