

Benjamin and the Mysteries of God

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King Benjamin had been praying for his people; in response, an angel appeared with an important announcement. The king then summoned his people to the temple to receive the angel's message in connection with a sacred name. The people embraced the angel's message, were born again, and entered into a holy covenant.

In this simple statement of basic facts from the Book of Mormon account, we discover at least four interesting questions: (1) What was Benjamin's role in the rebirth experience at the temple, and for what was he praying? (2) What was it the angel came to announce? (3) How would the name the king gave his people distinguish them from earlier Nephites, who, for five hundred years, anticipated the coming of Christ? (4) What was the nature of the change that the people received, and what does it all have to do with the mysteries of God? In the pursuit of answers to these questions, we will explore the nature of priesthood and its relationship to the mystery of spiritual rebirth.

The Mysteries of God

The scriptures repeatedly invite the reader to inquire about and receive an understanding of the mysteries of God (see Alma 26:22; D&C 6:11; 42:61). *Mysteries* are spiritual realities that can be known and understood only by revelation because they exist outside man's sensory perception; but our scriptures record them, our prophets teach them, and the Holy Ghost reveals them to the diligent seeker. In fact, the whole gospel is a collection of mysteries—truths pertaining to salvation that would not be known by men in the mortal probation if God did not reveal them. Benjamin's address begins with an invitation to prepare to view the mysteries of God:

My brethren, all ye that have assembled yourselves together, . . . I have not commanded you to come up hither to trifle with the words which I shall speak, but that you should hearken unto me, and open your ears that ye may hear, and your hearts that ye may understand, and your minds that the *mysteries of God* may be unfolded to your view. (Mosiah 2:9)

The particular mystery that draws our attention here is the mystery of spiritual rebirth and the role that Benjamin's priesthood played in that experience.

Benjamin's Priesthood Role in the Prophetic Pattern: The Power to Bless

A study of Benjamin's role gives opportunity to look at Benjamin's priesthood work in particular, but also at priesthood in general. Priesthood is the great governing authority of the universe. It unlocks spiritual blessings of the eternal world for the heirs of salvation. "What was the power of Melchisedeck?" Joseph Smith asked.

Twas not the priesthood of Aaron etc., [but it was the power of] a king and a priest to the most high God. [That priesthood was] a perfect law of Theocracy holding *keys of power and blessings*. [It] stood as God to give laws to the people, administering endless lives to the sons and daughters of Adam.¹

The Prophet Joseph further explained:

[Priesthood] is the channel through which all knowledge, doctrine, the plan of salvation and every important matter is revealed from heaven.²

A brief look at the history of the priesthood on the earth reveals that men like Benjamin have stood in this priesthood channel unlocking the blessings of salvation for their people since the days of Adam. Adam, in fact, was the great prototype of priesthood holders who strove to bring their communities and their posterity into at-one-ment with the Lord Jesus Christ. Adam blessed his posterity because, the Prophet Joseph taught, “he wanted to bring them into the presence of God. They looked for a city . . . ‘whose builder and maker is God’ (Hebrews 11:10).”³

After Adam, Enoch labored with his people and succeeded in bringing to pass not only their sanctification, but also their translation (see Moses 7:21), a function of the higher priesthood. Following Enoch, Melchizedek, king and high priest of Salem, brought many into the fullness of the priesthood and the presence of God. His people also received translation, “obtained heaven, and sought for the city of Enoch” (Genesis 14:34 JST).

Our modern prophets strive in the same manner as Benjamin did to sanctify the members of the church and to unlock these priesthood powers in their behalf. Elder David B. Haight made reference to this power as he recounted a sacred experience in which he viewed the Savior’s ministry and came to a greater understanding of the power of the priesthood:

During those days of unconsciousness I was given, by the gift and power of the Holy Ghost, a more perfect knowledge of His mission. I was also given a more complete understanding of what it means to exercise, in His name, the *authority to unlock the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven* for the salvation of all who are faithful.⁴

Thus Benjamin, as a prophet, seer, revelator, king, and priest, held the keys of power and blessing for his community. A priesthood holder’s office is to sanctify himself and stand as an advocate before God seeking blessings for his community in the manner of the Lord Jesus Christ himself (see John 17:19), whether the community be as small as a family or as large as Benjamin’s kingdom. A righteous priesthood holder can work by faith to provide great benefits to his fellow beings (see Mosiah 8:18). He can, in fact, exercise great faith in behalf of others of lesser faith, “filling in” with faith for them; thus a prophet and a people together can bring down blessings for even a whole community (for example, see Ether 12:14). The Lord seems to be interested not only in individuals but also in groups of people who wish to establish holy cities and unite with heavenly communities. Like the ancients, one who holds the holy priesthood is always trying to establish a holy community, is always “look[ing] for a city” (Hebrews 11:10, 16). So it was with Benjamin.

Priesthood Power over Enemies

In analyzing the scriptural accounts of priesthood work, we discover that one major task of priesthood holders, in unlocking the blessings of salvation for their people, is to triumph over the powers of evil—over “enemies.” Of this task, Joseph Smith said:

Salvation is nothing more nor less than to triumph over all our enemies and put them under our feet. And when we have power to put all enemies under our feet in this world, and a knowledge to triumph over all evil spirits in the world to come, then we are saved.⁵

This is the pattern: the priesthood holder labors with all his faculties to rout Satan from his loved ones as that enemy is manifested in contention, mental warfare, and physical violence among the people. For any Melchizedek Priesthood holder to become a prince of peace, he must in some degree wrest his kingdom, great or small, from the adversary and halt the plans of the destroyer on behalf of his loved ones. The Book of Mormon's description of Melchizedek reflects this pattern:

Now this Melchizedek was a king over the land of Salem; and his people had waxed strong in iniquity and abomination; yea, they had all gone astray; they were full of all manner of wickedness; But Melchizedek having exercised mighty faith, and received the office of the high priesthood according to the holy order of God, did preach repentance unto his people. And behold, they did repent; and Melchizedek did establish peace in the land in his days; therefore he was called the prince of peace. (Alma 13:17–18)

In this priesthood pattern, Benjamin labored against manifest evil and spiritual entropy to save his people in the manner of Christ himself. He waged war against the destroying Lamanites—using the sword of Laban, going forth in the strength of the Lord (see Words of Mormon 1:13–14); he waged another battle against false prophets, preachers, and teachers; and then he put down contention among his people with the assistance of other holy prophets. The record says, “King Benjamin, by laboring with all the might of his body and the faculty of his whole soul, . . . did once more establish peace in the land” (Words of Mormon 1:18).

Benjamin then was not an anomaly; he acted in the tradition of all true prophets before and after him in drawing down spiritual blessings on his people as he strove to prepare them to return to God. He was therefore the very person in Zarahemla who had the power to pray that spiritual blessings would be poured out on this community of saints that they might be born again.

Benjamin's People, the Angel, and the Spiritual Rebirth

Benjamin's people were descendants of those righteous Nephites who fled from the land of Nephi under Benjamin's father, King Mosiah₁, and were led by the power of God to the land of Zarahemla, where they united with Zarahemla's people. Mosiah₁ restored the gospel among them and reigned over them. The important point here is that Benjamin's people were not spiritually ignorant; they were not hearing about the Lord Jesus Christ for the first time. The record states clearly that they were “a diligent people in keeping the commandments of the Lord” (Mosiah 1:11); it states that there were not any among them, except little children, who had not been taught “concerning the . . . prophecies which have been spoken by the holy prophets” and all that the Lord commanded their fathers to speak (Mosiah 2:34; see 2:35). I assume here that Benjamin's people, having been taught the gospel, had been previously baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

In addition, we might infer that Benjamin's people came up to the temple with some preparation for and in some anticipation of a spiritual event. They would have been aware of what their kings had been trying to do for them according to the ancient pattern. They knew there was a blessing awaiting them. They came up to the temple, in part, to give thanks to God for their king “who had taught them to keep the commandments of God, that they might rejoice and be filled with love towards God and all men” (Mosiah 2:4).

The phrases *to rejoice and be filled with love* and *to be filled with joy* seem to have a technical meaning in scripture. They appear to be alternative ways of describing being *born again*. Scripture abounds with references to being filled with this transforming joy and love under the influence of the Holy Ghost. Nephi said, for example, “[God] hath *filled me with his love*, even unto the consuming of my flesh” (2 Nephi 4:21); the Lamanites were “*filled with*

that joy which is unspeakable and *full of glory*. . . . The Holy Spirit of God did come down from heaven, and did enter into their hearts, and they were *filled as if with fire*" (Helaman 5:44–45); the Nephites with the resurrected Christ "were *filled with the Holy Ghost* and with fire" (3 Nephi 19:13); Mormon taught us to pray to be *filled with this love*, which is charity, or perfect love, which makes one pure like Christ (see Moroni 7:48).

Compare now the account of Benjamin's people:

The Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ who should come, according to the words which king Benjamin had spoken unto them. (Mosiah 4:3)

It seems that being filled with joy, love, and glory are all ways of describing being born again. Benjamin clearly identified for the people what they had experienced: "Behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters" (Mosiah 5:7). He said that they had "come to the knowledge of the *glory of God*," as they "tasted of his love" (Mosiah 4:11).

If to be *filled with joy* is closely related to being *born again*, then it would seem that the angel had come from God to authorize Benjamin to proceed with the endowment of the name and the rebirth. The angel declared that the time had come that these people might literally be "filled with joy" (Mosiah 4:3) and that "whosoever should believe that Christ should come, the same might receive remission of their sins, and *rejoice with exceedingly great joy*" (Mosiah 3:13).

It was not just the news that the Savior would minister on the earth in the near future that filled them with joy—because they already knew all the prophecies of the holy prophets with respect to the Savior's ministry—but that the atonement was about to become very personal to *them*. Their faith in the Lord was about to become knowledge (see Mosiah 5:4). This joy announced by the angel was not to be just a momentary experience. If they were diligent unto prayer (see Moroni 8:26) and obedient to other instructions their king would give them, they would be changed forever, could retain this perfect love and joy in their hearts, and would even "grow in the knowledge of the glory of [God]" (Mosiah 4:12). We might infer then that these two parties—the king and the people—had been praying and preparing for the time when the whole community, in the ancient tradition, might be redeemed and born again.

Without doubt, Benjamin knew what was going to transpire as he told his son to summon the people to the temple. He said, "I shall give this people a name . . . that never shall be blotted out, except it be through transgression" (Mosiah 1:11–12). Giving them the name forever is equivalent to causing them to be born again into the family of Christ. Because of the greater responsibility inherent in the formal taking of the name, Benjamin prefaced this spiritual endowment with warnings that if they proceeded with taking the name but then turned away in disobedience, they would have to drink of the cup of the wrath of God (see Mosiah 3:26) and they would drink damnation to their souls (see Mosiah 3:18, 25).

Notwithstanding the warning, the people crossed the threshold of spiritual experience into a fearsome, spiritually induced view of the *reality* of their fallen condition, confronting their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth. At the height of their distress, united under the influence of the Spirit, they cried aloud on the Lord's name and begged for a remission of sins (see Mosiah 4:20). In response, the Spirit of the Lord descended upon them, and they were "filled with joy," the record says, fulfilling the exact words and promise of the angel. Their hearts were purified as they received a remission of their sins and peace of conscience because of their "exceeding

faith . . . in Jesus Christ” (Mosiah 4:3). Benjamin observed, “He has poured out his Spirit upon you, and has caused that your hearts should be filled with joy, and has caused that your mouths should be stopped that ye could not find utterance, so exceedingly great was your joy” (Mosiah 4:20).

The Nature of Spiritual Rebirth

In trying to comprehend the nature and extent of the spiritual experience described here in Mosiah, our own experience tells us, as do the scriptures, that spiritual experience can range from the gentle impressions of the Holy Spirit to dramatic encounters with heavenly powers. Thus, spiritual rebirth may begin at baptism, but without doubt additional degrees of spiritual rebirth and sanctification lie ahead for the true disciple, even a consummate change in which he has received the power to yield his heart entirely to God (see Helaman 3:35). The description in Mosiah suggests such a change. In addition, based on other scriptures about being born again, it seems that the people partook of the following blessings:

1. As a result of the mighty change wrought in their hearts (see Mosiah 5:2), they received Christ’s image in their countenances; they could “sing the song of redeeming love,” their hearts having been “stripped of pride” and enmity (Alma 5:26, 28; see 5:12, 19).
2. Through the power of the Holy Ghost they were immersed in the heavenly fire, becoming one in God, attaining to a new order, as did Adam who, “born of the Spirit, and . . . quickened in the inner man, . . . heard a voice out of heaven, saying: Thou art baptized with fire, and with the Holy Ghost. . . . Thou art after the order of him who was without beginning of days or end of years, from all eternity to all eternity. Behold, *thou art one in me*, a son of God; and thus may all become my sons” (Moses 6:65–68).
3. To be born again is to be filled with “the Spirit of the Lord.” Alma defined this mighty change when he proclaimed: “I had been born of God. 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*” (Alma 36:23–24).
4. They enjoyed a degree of sanctification (see Mosiah 5:2). Their sins having been remitted, they could not look upon sin save with abhorrence; they also entered that spiritual dimension called “the rest of the Lord” (Alma 13:12).
5. They became, as mentioned above, candidates for the church of the Firstborn (see Mosiah 5:7; D&C 93:22).

What is impressive here is that Benjamin’s people were already commandment keepers. It is not a mighty change from evil to goodness that they have undergone, like Alma or Paul, but a profound transformation from basic goodness to something that exceeded their ability even to describe. This much they did say, “The Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent . . . has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).

Receiving the Name

What then distinguished Benjamin’s community “above all the people which the Lord God hath brought out of the land of Jerusalem” (Mosiah 1:11)? Perhaps this was the first time among all the people brought out from the land of Jerusalem that a king and priest—in the tradition of Adam, Enoch, and Melchizedek—had succeeded in bringing

his people to this point of transformation: he had caused them as a community actually to receive the name of Christ.

But what does it mean to receive the name of Christ? We remember that when we take the sacrament, we signify not that we have fully taken the name, but that we are willing to take the name (see Moroni 4:3; D&C 20:77; compare Mosiah 5:5). Elder Dallin H. Oaks emphasized the word *willingness*, pointing to a future consummation:

[B]y partaking of the sacrament we witness our willingness to participate in the sacred ordinances of the temple and to receive the highest blessings available through the name and by the authority of the Savior when he chooses to confer them upon us.⁶

Elder Bruce R. McConkie linked becoming a son or daughter of God with temple ordinances: “The ordinances that are performed in the temples are the ordinances of exaltation; they open the door to us to an inheritance of sonship; they open the door to us so that we may become sons and daughters, members of the household of God in eternity. . . . They open the door to becoming kings and priests and inheriting all things.”

In connection with being born again, Benjamin’s people may have received something of a temple endowment. In fact, we find in Benjamin’s discourse essential temple themes pertaining to the creation, fall, atonement, consecration, and covenant making. Benjamin’s last words pertain to being “sealed” to Christ and receiving eternal life (see Mosiah 5:15). Of course, important endowment elements are missing from the record, but had they been administered on this occasion, or at some later point, they would not, because of their sacred nature, have been included in our present Book of Mormon account. Nevertheless, King Benjamin’s people received an endowment of spiritual knowledge and power which took them from being good people to Christlike people—all in a temple setting. What they experienced through the power of the priesthood was a revelation of Christ’s nature and the power to be assimilated to his image.

Conclusion

The account of Benjamin’s people is compelling in its promise of that which awaits the diligent seeker of Christ. Ultimately, many spiritual questions are answered only after one’s own personal experience, to which experience the Lord generously extends invitation. The Lord said on one occasion to a group of saints, “Ye are not able to abide the presence of God now, neither the ministering of angels; wherefore, continue in patience until ye are perfected” (D&C 67:13); but he also taught: “Seek the face of the Lord always, that in patience ye may possess your souls, and ye shall have eternal life” (D&C 101:38). The message encourages diligence as well as patience for the fulfillment of the promise.

It is the privilege and responsibility of a community’s priesthood leader, through exercising mighty faith and laboring with his people, to bring them to a higher spiritual plane in their quest to return to God. Benjamin had been praying that the Lord would send his power to bring to pass a spiritually transforming experience for his people. The Lord sent his angel to declare to the king that power would be given to cause the people to be spiritually reborn, to become sons and daughters of Christ, and to receive the sacred name forever. The spiritual rebirth as a community and the taking of the name in a temple setting distinguished them from those whom the Lord had previously brought out of Jerusalem. The people tasted the glory of God and came to a personal knowledge of him; through the power of the Holy Spirit they experienced the mighty change of heart and the mystery of spiritual rebirth.

Much of the Book of Mormon is devoted to that comprehensive and *mighty* change described here in Benjamin's speech. That may be the reason President Benson pled with us to feast on this book. He wrote, "When we awake and are born of God, a new day will break and Zion will be redeemed. May we be convinced that Jesus is the Christ, choose to follow Him, be changed for Him, captained by Him, consumed in Him, and born again."⁷

Notes

1. *Words of Joseph Smith*, comp. and ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 244, corrections and emphasis added.
2. *Ibid.*, 38–39.
3. *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 159.
4. David B. Haight, "The Sacrament—and the Sacrifice," *Ensign* (November 1989): 60, emphasis added.
5. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 297.
6. Dallin H. Oaks, "Taking upon Us the Name of Jesus Christ," *Ensign* (May 1985): 81, emphasis added.
7. Ezra Taft Benson, "Born of God," *Ensign* (July 1989): 5.