With Real Intent

James E. Faulconer

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Faulconer discusses the evolution of his testimony of the Book of Mormon; years passed before he recognized the importance of that book to his life as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. After reading an article explaining the tree of life that is written about in 1 Nephi, he gained a deeper understanding of the purpose of the Book of Mormon—that the book prepares members of the church to enter into covenants with God in the temple and explains what those covenants are. In addition to that objective, the book testifies of and brings people to Jesus Christ.
Loving the Book of Mormon

James E. Faulconer

I had a testimony of the Book of Mormon long before I had a love for it. I joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a teenager, and I joined because I had an overpowering spiritual experience in which I learned that this church is indeed Christ’s church. I had read little of the Book of Mormon before that experience, and I had not prayed about the truth of the book. But once I knew that the church is true, I knew also that the Book of Mormon is scripture.

After being converted, I read church history and books about church teachings. Several knowledgeable Saints took me and my family by the hands and helped us learn what it means to be members. They taught us about Latter-day Saint beliefs and helped us learn the customs and practices of the church. I continued to read the Bible, with which I was already familiar. But in the sixties there was not very much emphasis in the church on scriptural literacy, and the few times I tried reading the Book of Mormon, I found myself agreeing with Mark Twain’s description of it as “chloroform in print.” I didn’t know the Book of Mormon stories or teachings. I didn’t enjoy reading the book, and I had little motivation to change. During the three years after my baptism, I never read more than the first few pages and whatever individual passages someone might refer to in a lesson.

Finally, as a freshman at Brigham Young University, I was supposed to read the Book of Mormon because I had to take a Book of Mormon class, and I did read most of it. Still I didn’t know it well or appreciate it as scripture. I first read the Book of Mormon from cover to cover while on my mission in Korea, and I read it regularly while I served there; but the book was not available in Korean for most of my mission, so it played a relatively small role in my missionary teaching. Finally I began actually to know something about the Book of Mormon’s contents, but I continued to much prefer the Bible. I had not yet discovered the wonder of the Book of Mormon.

After my return home, I continued to focus most of my scripture study on the Bible, though reading church history had made me interested in the Doctrine and Covenants as well. While I was in graduate school, experience with one of my professors who was also a rabbi deepened my appreciation for the Bible and gave me a new set of study techniques and habits, as well as insight into the profundity of the scriptures. Nevertheless, the Book of Mormon remained on the periphery of my spiritual life.

Then, sometime in the 1980s, that changed. A friend, Bruce Jorgensen (an English professor at BYU), gave me a copy of an essay he had written on the tree of life in the Book of Mormon. Bruce is an excellent teacher and writer. I had long admired him and was flattered that he would ask me to read and comment on his essay. After reading his work, I was not only flattered but thankful, for as I read it I began to see the Book of Mormon in new light. For the first time, I found it beautiful and interesting. For the first time, I knew that the Book of Mormon is not only true, but that it has important lessons to teach me. For the first time, I saw that without the Book of Mormon my understanding of the gospel was incomplete. For the first time, I began to grasp why the Prophet Joseph Smith called the Book of Mormon “the keystone” of our faith.

There are many things the Book of Mormon gives us that we can find no place else, but for me one stands out: without the
Book of Mormon we do not fully know the covenants that we must be part of to obtain eternal life. In the temple we learn that our covenants are explained in the scriptures. To keep those covenants, we must know what the scriptures teach, and to know what they teach, we must have studied them.

The title page of the Book of Mormon makes this explicit when it says the Book of Mormon “is to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever.” Many people, like me, are not part of the remnant to whom that purpose is addressed, namely, the descendants of Lehi. Nevertheless, like them, we can learn about our covenant relation to the Lord by reading the Book of Mormon. One important part of understanding that relation is something of which we often speak—obedience. But the Book of Mormon teaches that obedience is broader than we think if we only think in terms of specific rules to follow. To know the covenants of the Lord is to know what the Lord expects of those who have covenanted with him, and as Alma makes clear, he expects more than formulaic obedience. Our covenant obligation is wider than any formulaic behavior can be responsible for.

Only in the Book of Mormon do we have a clear presentation of the obligations that come to us through the covenant of baptism. Alma says to be baptized is to witness that ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light; yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life. (Mosiah 18:8–9)

To read the Book of Mormon is to learn that to be baptized and to renew that covenant at the sacrament table is to covenant that we will imitate Christ in bearing the burdens of and comforting our brothers and sisters and in being witnesses of God—which are probably two ways of saying the same thing: On the one hand, to bear the burdens of others and comfort them is to imitate, though in a very small way, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; so it is to bear witness of God. On the other hand, to bear witness, as when one bears testimony, is to offer strength to those who hear that testimony by the Spirit. It is to comfort in the sense suggested by the Latin roots of that word: “to strengthen.” That both giving comfort and bearing witness are required of those who enter the covenant of baptism can be inferred from the New Testament, but only the Book of Mormon makes them explicit.

Besides promising Lehi’s children a knowledge of their covenants, the title page of the Book of Mormon promises them more, and I assume that the rest of us can profit from the same promise. It not only says that we will learn our covenants, it says that by knowing those covenants, we will know that we are not cast off from the Lord forever. Knowing our covenant relation is a great blessing, for as we come to know it, we come to understand that repentance and salvation are possible and, by inference, that the sealing power of the covenant is real and eternal. We learn that the promises made to Abraham and his descendants can be fulfilled in us.

Just as he did with ancient Israel, the Lord exercised patience and long-suffering with the Lamanites and Nephites. He endured their constant backsliding and repentance followed by more backsliding. Though he did not countenance their wickedness and though they moved deeper and deeper into sin, the Lord continually held out the promise that they could be saved. Even when total annihilation loomed, the Lord left open a path for saving the children of Lehi. Of course, in the Hebrew Bible we can see this same cycle of righteousness, followed by prosperity, followed by pride, followed by wickedness and then downfall, followed by humility and a return to righteousness. However, we see it more easily in the Book of Mormon because it shows that pattern so clearly. Perhaps most important, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon proves that the Lord keeps his promise that Israel’s children will be given a means of salvation. If we apply the message of this teaching to ourselves (see 1 Nephi 19:23), we begin to appreciate the patience and long-suffering that the Lord will have as he deals with us, our parents, and
our children; and he teaches us the kind of patience we must have with others.

The message of patience and long-suffering, of the possibility of salvation and restoration, gives the Book of Mormon a different look than we might think it to have. In spite of what someone might think he or she sees in the Book of Mormon at first glance—seeing the increasing hostility and war among the Lamanites and Nephites and, finally, the total destruction of the Nephites—the Book of Mormon teaches us to hope. In spite of the total destruction of their people, Mormon and Moroni continue to hope. They compile the Book of Mormon with an eye toward those who are to come, those whom they do not know and cannot see (except as they see them in revelation). They do not know specifically how or when their people will be saved, but they do not give up hope. They trust the Father and the Son to keep their covenants, and Mormon and Moroni continue to hope. They study and teach scriptures, if we do so diligently and faithfully, leaving our hearts open to the changes that the Holy Ghost can bring about, is to study and teach righteousness. More important, it is to learn righteousness, to become righteous.

The title page also says to all that its purpose is to convince us that Jesus is the Christ. As the subtitle to the Book of Mormon reminds us, the Book of Mormon is a witness of Jesus’ divinity. The primary purpose of the Book of Mormon is to convince us that Jesus is the Savior, the Son of the Father.

King Benjamin spoke of both purposes mentioned in the title page, namely, that the Book of Mormon teaches of our covenant relation with the Lord and testifies of him:

I say unto you, if ye have come to a knowledge of the goodness of God, and his matchless power, and his wisdom, and his patience, and his long-suffering towards the children of men; and also, the atonement which has been prepared from the foundation of the world, that thereby salvation might come to him that should put his trust in the Lord, and should be diligent in keeping his commandments, and continue in the faith even unto the end of his life, I mean the life of the mortal body—I say, that this is the man who receiveth salvation, through the atonement which was prepared from the foundation of the world for all mankind, which ever were since the fall of Adam, or who are, or who ever shall be, even unto the end of the world. And this is the means whereby salvation cometh. And there is none other salvation save this which hath been spoken of; neither are there any conditions whereby man can be saved except the conditions which I have told you. (Mosiah 4:6–8)

No scripture in the Bible gives us such explicit instruction in what it means to have entered into a covenant with the Father and how that covenant with him requires us to understand and accept the atoning sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ. We do not see much of the life of Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon, but we are taught much about what it means to say that he is the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ.

We read scripture over and over again so that we can experience the scriptural testimony of Jesus Christ—hearing it with our hearts. Most church members have read the Book of Mormon before, and even those who have not read it often know a good deal
about its message because they have been taught about it in Primary, Sunday School, sacrament meetings, and seminary. I knew the basics of the teachings of the Book of Mormon before my mission, but knowing those teachings is not enough. There is a difference between knowing the doctrines of the kingdom and undergoing an experience that motivates us to live those doctrines.

Alma teaches that “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, or anything else” (Alma 31:5). He explicitly says that preaching is a more powerful tool for conversion than any other kind of experience. To read scripture attentively and prayerfully is to be preached to. In the scriptures the Lord and his prophets speak to us, preach to us, and in preaching to us they do something more than just convey information. If we will listen as we read, if we will allow our hearts and minds to be open to the new things that we may discover and be taught, the scriptures will teach us to be just, to be the kind of people a covenant people must be. In a word, we hear the voice of God.

Thus, reading the Book of Mormon does more than teach us doctrines. It gives us experience, the vicarious experience of those we read about and, more important, the experience with the Spirit that comes from reading their stories and sermons. Reading the Book of Mormon gives us an opportunity to be influenced. If we read prayerfully and with a heart open to the Spirit, any scripture can give us an experience with the Spirit. Reading scripture is a way to allow the Lord to teach us, to preach to us, as it were, and the Book of Mormon is the scripture provided explicitly for our times as the means for teaching that Jesus is the Christ.

As every Latter-day Saint knows, Moroni 10:4–5 makes a promise to the Lamanites, one on which the rest of us also rely: that we can know the truth of the Book of Mormon through prayer. We often speak of that promise. It takes little thought to see that it is a promise that we too can come to know that Jesus is the Christ. Less often we discuss the exhortation made to the whole world that follows Moroni 10:4–5:

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, 31, 32–33)

That is the promise of the Book of Mormon: if, learning of Christ, we come to him, we can be sanctified. If we read with our hearts attuned to the Spirit, we hear the message of sanctification preached throughout the Book of Mormon.

Though it was a while in coming, my experience with the Book of Mormon is that, as much or more than any other scriptural work, it opens the opportunity for me to enjoy an experience with the Spirit, an experience in which I learn not only the content of the Book of Mormon, but, more important, what it means to be a saint, a person who desires to be holy, who desires to be like the Savior, Jesus Christ. Reading the Book of Mormon gives me a chance to hear the call of the Spirit, to have, at least for a while, my desires purified, to have “no more desire to do evil” (Alma 19:33). The Book of Mormon straightforwardly directs me along the path I started on when was baptized, and that is why I love it.
114. See 3 Nephi 28:16–13, where the Nephite record did not contain part of the prophecy of Samuel the Lamanite (now in Helaman 14:25) and Nephi was constrained to speak unto Laban (chaps. 3 and 4) in 3 Nephi 24–25. Mormon, having been forbidden to write all of Christ's words to the Nephites, notes in 3 Nephi 26:12-13: "Mormon, do write the things which have been commanded me. And I did write part of my sayings, and proceed to write the things which have been commanded me.

105. See, for example, 2 Nephi 4:14: "For I, Nephi, was constrained to speak unto [Laman and Lemuel], according to his [Laman's] words, for I had spoken many things unto them, and also my father, before his death; many of which sayings were written upon mine other plates; for a more history part are written upon mine other plates." See also Jacob 1:2: "And he [Jacob] provided, a commencement that I should write upon these plates a few of the things which I considered to be most precious, that I should not touch, save it were lightly, concerning the history of this people which are called the people of Nephi.

106. For example, Nephi is forbidden to write part of his vision in 1 Nephi 14 (see vv. 19–20) and it is told that John, "the apostle of the Lamb of God[,] . . . was forbidden from writing part of his vision in 1 Nephi 14–29; 2 Nephi 6:2–13) and Nephi (1 Nephi 19:8–24 through 1 Nephi 22).

107. The blood of the consecration ram on the atonement, "were forbidden that there should be any ground to appeal to, or on no ground whatsoever. It may be that the values of those ordinary persons who know the Book of Mormon is a true witness of Christ will prove to be those of Aish. They give a copy of the Book of Mormon to a stranger, trusting that the spirit of God will work that person and that the spiritual witnesses in that book will bear testimony of Christ again and again to the reader. Many will believe those witnesses, though they have no other.

108. See 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6; Ether 15:33). Note also the imagery of the daughters of Zion in 2 Nephi 13:16, 18 (Isaiah 3:16, 18) and Zion as a woman in 3 Nephi 22 (Isaiah 54:1). See also John A. Hoyme, "The Lord's Covenant of Kindness: Isaiah 54:10–32" (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), ch. 1.

109. "Mormon was forbidden to write the place-names in the Book of Mormon—small plates or the large plates of Nephi—is a well or watering place (see Joan Copeland Bicks, Dictionary of Old South Arabic. Salameh Dictionary, Harvard Semitic Studies 25 [Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982], 482). Finally, in modern Arabic the root rwy means "to provide with water," which rwy is a well or watering place (see Joan Copeland Bicks, Dictionary of Old South Arabic. Salameh Dictionary, Harvard Semitic Studies 25 [Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982], 482). Finally, in modern Arabic the root rwy is associated with water for drinking and irrigation (see Edward William Lane, Ar Arabic-English Lexicon [Barnes, New York: Librairie du Liban, 1980], 3:1194–95).

110. For example, in 1 Nephi 16:34, the chapter to Jacob and Joseph, which I use as a classic language after the time of Christ.

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2. "I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any books on earth, and the Yeoman religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book." (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith ed. Joseph F. Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1968], 194).

3. See Mormon 10:24, where Mormon specifically calls those witnesses in that book "the apostle of the Lamb of God[,] . . . was forbidden from writing part of his vision in 1 Nephi 14–29; 2 Nephi 6:2–13) and Nephi (1 Nephi 19:8–24 through 1 Nephi 22).

4. Despite popular assumptions, nowhere in the Book of Mormon—small plates or Moroni's abridgment—does an author or, for that matter, Lehi, inform the reader. Many will believe those witnesses in that book will bear testimony of Christ again and again to the reader. Many will believe those witnesses, though they have no other.

[What's in a Name?]

Irreantum
Paul Y. Hockinson, with Brian M. Hauglid and John Gee

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