Pride: A Challenge from Within

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The age-old problem described so well by prophets in the Book of Mormon and reiterated by modern prophets can beset any of us if we let it.

We live in a glorious era of the earth’s history when the fulness of the gospel has been restored. It is an exciting time to be a Church member: to see nearly 50,000 missionaries teaching the gospel to many of the nations of the earth, to have meetinghouses springing up like mushrooms, to have sacred temples rising majestically, to have the use of computers to search for ancestors, to hear prophets and Apostles by satellite transmission. Indeed, these are extraordinary times by any measure.

And yet there is a wise saying in French: Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose, which means, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” Despite the progress, prosperity, and success of today’s Church, there seem to be challenges to Church members that are common to men and women of all ages. We are blessed to have written records of the experiences of members of Christ’s Church in previous eras, such as the Book of Mormon, a sacred record that provides wonderful insights about common challenges.

One of many such examples is found in the teachings of Jacob, the brother of Nephi and son of Lehi. The Nephites had separated from the Lamanites, they had been diligently taught principles of the gospel by Lehi and Nephi, the Church was established, and a temple had been built. Yet Jacob, who had been in the temple to obtain his “errand from the Lord” (Jacob 1:17), made this very interesting statement to the people: “Behold, hearken ye unto me, and know that by the help of the all-powerful Creator of heaven and earth I can tell you concerning your thoughts, how that ye are beginning to labor in sin, which sin appeareth very abominable unto me, yea, and abominable unto God” (Jacob 2:5; emphasis added). Jacob had been shown by God the minds and hearts of his people and therefore could prepare specific counsel for them.

He first spoke to the people in plainness about pride and then about immorality (see Jacob 2:12–22, 23–33). He clearly pointed out to the people that these sins were not challenges from outside the Church but from within, initiated in their thoughts—their minds and hearts—as they dealt with the daily challenges of living gospel principles.

Jacob’s experience can be applied to our time. Today we live in a world full of external influences. As members of the Church, we are appropriately admonished to be “in the world but not of the world.” In other words, we seek to establish an environment and a mind-set which allows us to withstand the enemy without. And it is certainly wise to do so, for there is ample evidence that the evils of the world can bring sorrow and tragedy whenever we do not protect ourselves against their influence.

However, Jacob’s full message should be clear to every Latter-day Saint. There are challenges from within that are every bit as difficult as those from without. We must not assume that once we are within the fold we will find our safety assured; rather, we need to be aware of the potentially serious pitfalls strewn in the way of converted, practicing Latter-day Saints. President Ezra Taft Benson’s [page 18] admonition to study the Book of Mormon was designed to help us avoid some of the problems experienced by former-day Saints. As the Book of Mormon unfolds a thousand years of history, we receive extraordinary doctrinal teachings and practical wisdom from the experience of members of the Church.

Mormon, who compiled the record, had an especially interesting insight into the history of his people. In the space of 395 of our modern-day pages, he chronicled nearly 600 years of history. He also had his own personal experience to draw upon. When he paused in chapter 12 of Helaman to express his frustration with a repeating pattern he had observed that suggests how slow his people were to learn, we as members of the Church today should pay special attention. He begins by commenting in verse one about the “unsteadiness of the hearts of the children of men.” In verse two, he summarizes the 600 years as follows:

“Yea, and we may see at the very time when he [the Lord] doth prosper his people, yea, in the increase of their fields, their flocks and their herds, and in gold, and in silver, and in all manner of precious things of every kind and art; sparing their lives, and delivering them out of the hands of their enemies; softening the hearts of...
their enemies that they should not declare wars against them; yea, and in fine, doing all things for the welfare and happiness of his people; yea, then is the time that they do harden their hearts, and do forget the Lord their God, and do trample under their feet the Holy One—yea, and this because of their ease, and their exceedingly great prosperity.”

After Mormon rehearses that pattern of iniquity, he provides in verse six a classic one-verse analysis of the problem: “Behold, they do not desire that the Lord their God, who hath created them, should rule and reign over them; notwithstanding his great goodness and his mercy towards them, they do set at naught his counsels, and they will not that he should be their guide.” Mormon is amazed that a people can continue in such self-destructive behavior instead of simply acknowledging the goodness of the Lord and letting themselves be led by His counsel.

Mormon continues his lament [page 19] with a vivid analogy: “The children of men … are less than the dust of the earth.

“For behold, the dust of the earth moveth hither and thither, to the dividing asunder, at the command of our great and everlasting God.

“Yea, behold at his voice do the hills and the mountains tremble and quake.

“And by the power of his voice they are broken up, and become smooth, yea, even like unto a valley.

“Yea, by the power of his voice doth the whole earth shake;

“Yea, by the power of his voice, do the foundations rock, even to the very center.

“Yea, and if he say unto the earth—Move—it is moved” (Hel. 12:7–13).

With occasional exceptions, the Church has endured the early period when its members were severely and directly tested from without. The early persecutions, the subsequent flight to the Rocky Mountains, and the challenges from the national government are behind us. There are stakes of Zion in many countries and lands. But is it possible that in not a few of these stakes, conditions are developing that have been described again and again in the Book of Mormon?

The age-old problem described so well by prophets in the Book of Mormon and reiterated by modern prophets seems to be one of pride. Pride in its many forms is the great challenge from within. Mormon expressed it so well when he said, “Behold, they do not desire that the Lord their God, who hath created them, should rule and reign over them” (Hel. 12:6). Once rooted in a person’s heart, pride sets the stage for spiritual downfall: unrighteous thoughts that spring up from within can lead to an unwillingness to be submissive or to follow counsel. For some, personal prosperity reinforces the notion that they are doing fine on their own. Others begin to feel that rules can be tailored a little to meet their personal desires. Sound teachings become old-fashioned, and leaders start to seem out of touch, unfeeling, or too old. None of these thoughts happen overnight but come gradually as humility and meekness are eroded by possessions, status, and prosperity. Pride causes a hardened heart and spiritual deafness, both of which can ultimately lead to a host of more serious sins. In the worst case, a person may go beyond self-destructive behavior and become an enemy to God, desiring to fight openly against His teachings.

A most disquieting aspect of the repeated cycles described in the Book of Mormon is the time frame, for an entire people can “become weak, because of their transgression, in the space of not many years” (Hel. 4:26; emphasis added). Whether it be individuals or a whole society, it is possible that decay from within can wreak havoc in a relatively short time.

As people individually or collectively experience conditions that may lead unwittingly to their own downfall, what can be done? I would like to recommend three steps that can help. First, Jacob acknowledged that the people had begun to have inappropriate thoughts: thoughts of gain, of advantage, of status, of power, of lust. How useful it would be from time to time to take an inventory of our thoughts and the feelings of our hearts. Such an examination might involve asking questions like, What do I spend time thinking about? Do I ever feel uneasy about my thoughts? How do my thoughts compare with concepts taught in the scriptures and by spiritual leaders? Have I read the Sermon on the Mount lately, and do I understand its applications? Am I nervous, anxious, and upset, or calm and confident?

Second, a behavior check may be helpful. Certain behaviors can be early warning signals; for example, spending patterns, “harmless” flirting, missing church meetings and assignments, and wearing temple garments inappropriately. The rationalizations are all familiar: “So and so does it.” “A little won’t matter.” “Nobody will know or care.” When we carefully and prayerfully examine our behaviors, the Spirit may prompt needed adjustments.

Third, it is useful to return to the basics and review the fundamental concepts of the plan of redemption. Alma observed, “Therefore God gave unto them commandments, after having made known unto them the plan of redemption” (Alma 12:32; emphasis added). We infer from this that an understanding of the plan of
redemption is an important prerequisite to an appreciation of commandments. Our motivation for the difficult act of repentance comes after and as a result of understanding the role that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ plays in the plan. Hearts are changed, thoughts are controlled, and behavior is modified when the plan is well understood.

Alma had firsthand experience with this principle. As both the chief judge and presiding high priest over his people, he observed that many of the difficulties they faced came from within: “For they saw and beheld with great sorrow that the people of the church began to be lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and to set their hearts upon riches and upon the vain things of the world” (Alma 4:8). And so he appointed another to fill the office of chief judge and retained the office of high priest. “And this he did that he himself might go forth among his people, … that he might preach the word of God unto them … and that he might pull down, by the word of God, all the pride and craftiness and all the contentions which were among his people” (Alma 4:19). Alma recognized that there was enormous power in teaching the plan—the doctrine, the word of God. This is equally true today.

How blessed we are to have the Book of Mormon and to learn from it enduring truths that can be so helpful for today. Life is complicated, and among its many challenges, some of the greatest come from within. But we are not destined to repeat the past if we can learn from it. May we echo the words of the ancient prophet Nephi: “I know in whom I have trusted.

“My God hath been my support. …

“O Lord, I have trusted in thee and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh” (2 Ne. 4:19–20, 34).

To learn this great lesson from the Book of Mormon that pride and reliance on the arm of flesh can be replaced with trust in the Lord is to be blessed for eternity by an extraordinary book containing the word of God.