Enemies of Righteousness

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The Book of Mormon identifies latter-day forces that oppose the Lord.

Several years ago in a professional football play-off game, the team that was expected to lose intercepted two passes and ran them back for touchdowns. After the upset victory, the press reported that an assistant coach, with the aid of binoculars, had decoded the signals being sent to the quarterback. With a walkie-talkie, he had radioed the codes to the defensive backfield coach, who had then informed his players.

Obviously, being able to recognize their adversary’s strategy gave that team an advantage.

Our war with the enemy of righteousness presents us with many challenges, and in order to defend ourselves, we need to understand how Satan and his servants will attack us. It is comforting to know that the Lord has not left us without the information we need. Much of it is found in the Book of Mormon.


In particular, 2 Nephi 28 prophetically reveals important truths concerning several of the chief enemies of the Lord Jesus Christ and his Saints, particularly the Saints of the latter days. The enemies it identifies are false doctrines (called the precepts of men), false teachers, pride, apathy, and Satan himself.

False Doctrines—the Precepts of Men

The first enemy of Christ that Nephi reveals is false, vain, and foolish doctrines taught by churches that are “built up,” but “not unto the Lord.” (2 Ne. 28:3, 9.) Verse 3 of 2 Nephi 28 describes the religious contention in these latter days, and verse 4 prophesies that latter-day churches “shall teach with their learning, and deny the Holy Ghost, which giveth utterance.” (2 Ne. 28:3–4.) Because the learning of men would supplant the spirit of revelation as the basis of determining truth, contests of opinions and contention among the clergy would characterize these churches. (See JS—H 1:6.)

In verses 5 and 6 of 2 Nephi 28, Nephi identifies several false precepts that would be taught in the latter days. Churches would deny the power of God, saying, “There is no God today, for the Lord and the Redeemer hath done his work, and he hath given his power unto men.” They would claim that he is not a God of miracles.

In each case, these precepts specify what God cannot do. The phrase repeated in both verses is “[the Redeemer] hath done his work”—which directly attacks the doctrines of revelation and restoration. If there were no miracles, for example, there would be no first vision of Joseph Smith. If there were no power of God, the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods would not be restored.

The phrase is remarkably similar to words used by a minister when Joseph Smith told him about his vision in the Sacred Grove. Joseph wrote: “I was greatly surprised at his behavior; he treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them.” (JS—H 1:21; italics added.)

In verses 7 and 8 of 2 Nephi 28, Nephi expresses two anti-Christ philosophies. One is a modification of the other; both offer systems of salvation contrary to God’s revealed word.

The first is described in verse 7: “There shall be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die; and it shall be well with us.” The emphasis is both humanistic and hedonistic. According to this philosophy, individuals may freely gratify their own carnal desires, set their own standards of morality, live for the pleasure of the moment, and do so without guilt, as if death brings no accounting of one’s life.

This evil idea, taught by noted anti-Christers like Nehor and Korihor, totally denies the justice of God. For example, Nehor taught that “all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life.” (Alma 1:4.)
False teachers today echo Nehor’s words in ways that destroy souls. One philosophy commonly espoused is that extramarital affairs are acceptable. For example, a recent news article reported the work of one counselor who conducts workshops “for married women who are having, or thinking of having, extramarital affairs.” Workshop participants are given practical advice such as remembering to cover absences with excuses a husband cannot check, and to resist the temptation to confess. … The workshops stress enjoyment without guilt,” the article said. (“She Teaches Women How to Cheat,” Honolulu Star Bulletin, 2 Nov. 1983, p. 4.)

Instead of teaching people to remove feelings of guilt through contrition and repentance, some modern teachers seek to strip God’s children of his gift of conscience by teaching them to lower their moral standards and searing their consciences. In such ways, some modern teachers seek to overturn gospel values with their false ones.

Eating, drinking, and being merry are not synonymous with happiness. They never have been. Samuel the Lamanite told the Nephites, “Ye have sought all the days of your lives for that which ye could not obtain; and ye have sought for happiness in doing iniquity, which thing is contrary to the nature of that righteousness which is in our great and Eternal Head.” (Hel. 13:38.)

In verse 8 of 2 Nephi 28, Nephi refers to a variation of the false teaching in verse 7: “There shall also be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin; yea, lie a little, take advantage of one because of his words, dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this; and do all these things, for tomorrow we die; and if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God.”

This doctrine still circumvents full repentance. Alma’s youngest son, Corianton, struggled with this philosophy—he thought it injustice to consign a sinner to a state of misery. (See Alma 42:1.) Alma’s answer in Alma 42 describes the true relationship between God’s mercy and justice. Mercy cannot rob justice, but through the atonement of Jesus Christ, mercy can appease justice if one repents.

A key point in 2 Nephi 28:8 is the phrase “there is no harm in this.” This devilish whisper invites good men and women to be selectively obedient. Such a whisper suggests that some sins are little and that these “little” sins may be excused because they are not harmful.

Nephi calls these two philosophies vain doctrines. Perhaps the vanity of the doctrines lies in their self-centeredness. The lie, the digging of the pit, the taking advantage of a neighbor elevate one person at the expense of another. The “live for today” philosophy goes hand-in-hand with the “me first” attitude so prevalent in our society.

False Teachers

Nephi next attacks the teachers of these false doctrines. He begins in verse 9 by exposing some of their characteristics, activities, and motivations: “There shall be many which shall teach after this manner, false and vain and foolish doctrines, and shall be puffed up in their hearts, and shall seek deep to hide their counsels from the Lord; and their works shall be in the dark.” These teachers are the opposite extreme of the humble teachers of righteousness. They seek to counteract or undo the worthy work of their righteous predecessors and contemporaries. Nephi wrote: “The blood of the saints shall cry from the ground against them.” (2 Ne. 28:10.)

In Mormon 8, Moroni describes false teachers in a manner similar to Nephi’s. The false teachers the two saw in vision would have stiff necks and high heads (see 2 Ne. 28:14) and would love money and their substance more than the poor (see Morm. 8:37.) In their quest for praise and gain, they would rob the poor and persecute the meek through priestcraft, requiring their followers to build extravagant sanctuaries and to supply them with costly apparel. (See 2 Ne. 28:13; Morm. 8:33–38.)

The deceiver and the deceived would create a situation like that of the Nephites prior to the birth of Christ. Samuel said to the inhabitants of Zarahemla: “If a prophet come among you and declareth unto you the word of the Lord, which testifieth of your sins and iniquities, ye are angry with him, and cast him out and seek all manner of ways to destroy him; yea, you will say that he is a false prophet … “But behold, if a man shall come among you and shall say: Do this, and there is no iniquity; do that and ye shall not suffer; yea, he will say: … Do whatsoever your heart desireth … , ye will receive him, and say that he is a prophet.

“Yea, ye will lift him up, and ye will give unto him of your substance; … ye will clothe him with costly apparel; and because he speaketh flattering words unto you, and he saith that all is well, then ye will not find fault with him.” (Hel. 13:26–28.)

Nehor was quite adept at using this type of easy preachment. His formula for success as a teacher was to soothe the consciences of the congregation. Popularity and praise would inevitably follow. (See Alma 1:2–16.) This is typical of priestcraft.
Pride

Recently, President Benson taught the Church about the dire consequences of pride. He said, “Pride is the universal sin, the great vice.” It is the foundation sin that spawns all of these false teachings and teachers. Pride is the enemy of Christ that laid claim to victory over the entire Nephite civilization. (See Ensign, May 1989, pp. 4–6.)

Nephi, too, saw the powerful effects of pride in the latter days. He identified four results of pride: corrupt churches, persecution of the meek and the poor in heart, wickedness – particularly whoredoms – and apostasy. (2 Ne. 28:12–14.)

Pride seems to be the first step to sin and wickedness. Boasting leads to envy and strife, then to malice and persecution, and then, if unchecked, to murder and “all manner of iniquities.” (See Hel. 13:22.)

Latter-day Saints who pay attention to Nephi’s words can identify those beset by pride: they deride the Church’s standards, denounce its doctrines, teach an easy road or multidirectional highway to heaven, or promote a hedonistic life-style. Church members must constantly guard themselves against seeking praise, power, or wealth. As Nephi told us, “They have all gone astray save it be a few, who are the humble followers of Christ.” (2 Ne. 28:14.)

Apathy

In 2 Nephi 28:21, Nephi identifies another enemy within the Church—apathy. He writes, “Others will [Satan] pacify.” Many parents express gratitude for the invention of the pacifier. Put one in a baby’s mouth, and the baby begins to suck contentedly and may eventually fall asleep. Disciples of Christ can also relax in their discipleship to the point where they fall asleep spiritually. Satan lulls them into saying, “All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well.”

When people become too secure in their righteousness, their lengthened strides can quickly turn into lethargic plods. As the man of the house does in the parable, they “fall asleep,” and their property (in this case, their souls) are open for the thief to come in and plunder. (See Matt. 24:43.)

How is it that some who dwell in Zion can say, “All is well”? Perhaps their condition gives them leisure to consider, then to tolerate worldly measures more and more. After a while, their reactions against temptation weaken, and things that would have shocked them a few years before now seem [page 10] tolerable, perhaps even desirable. Lulled into a false sense of security, they are led down to hell.

Another approach Satan uses to encourage spiritual apathy is convincing people that “there is no hell,” and “I am no devil, for there is none.” (2 Ne. 28:22.) By such reasoning, evil and moral truth become relative. God is dethroned, and man becomes his own measure of right and wrong. Hence, there is no need to worry about obtaining eternal life; it is either guaranteed or doesn’t exist. Or so Satan would have the spiritually somnolent believe.

In 1929, a survey asked five hundred ministers and five hundred theological students two questions: “Do you believe that hell exists as an actual place or location?” and “Do you believe that the devil exists as an actual being?” Concerning the existence of hell, 53 percent of the ministers said yes, 34 percent said no, and 13 percent were uncertain. Only 11 percent of the theological students said yes, 76 percent said no, and 13 percent were uncertain. Regarding the devil’s existence, 40 percent of the ministers said yes, 33 percent said no, and 7 percent were uncertain. However, a mere 9 percent of the theological students said yes, while 82 percent said no and 9 percent were uncertain. (Leo Rosten, ed., A Guide to the Religion of America, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955, p. 237.)

These statistics demonstrate how successfully Satan espouses doctrine the Book of Mormon reveals to be evil and dangerous.

Satan, the Chief Enemy of Christ

The Book of Mormon is a witness of the reality of the enemy of all righteousness – Satan, who desires “that all men might be miserable like unto himself.” (2 Ne. 2:27.) In 2 Nephi 28:19–23, Nephi focuses on the tactics of the arch-enemy. A look at some of the key verbs in this passage can help us understand how Satan operates: he grasps, he rages, he stirs up, he cheats, he flatters, he lies. In short, Satan customizes his attacks to prey on the susceptibility of his targets. He moves carefully, painstakingly, subtly binding men and women with one strand of sin at a time. Knowing that only a few would follow him if his true identity and design were manifested, he draws people into falsely concluding that they are winning, when, in fact, they are losing – slowly being destroyed.

He rages in the hearts of some individuals and stirs them up “to anger against that which is good.” (2 Ne. 28:20.) This anger blinds their eyes and closes their hearts. It probably does not matter to Satan if people denounce him and proclaim the gospel of Christ – so long as they are blindly riveted to false doctrine and the traditions of men. In verse 16 (and reechoed in verse 28), Nephi writes: “Wo unto them that turn aside the just for a thing of naught and revile against that which is good,
and say that is of no worth! … And in fine, wo unto all those who tremble, and are angry because of the truth of God!”

Such is the danger of anger that Nephi devotes the next chapter entirely to one particular good thing that people would become angry at—the Book of Mormon itself. He prophesied that a great many would reject and revile the Book of Mormon, saying, “A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible.” (2 Ne. 29:3.)

It would be extremely challenging for a writer to be able to describe, for a people two thousand years in the future, their objections to his work and then counter those objections even before they are raised. But Nephi did all that so well that missionaries use his words to answer the very objections he foresaw would be raised.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote: “There are … millions of sincere and devout persons who disbelieve, oppose, and openly fight the Book of Mormon. … What is it about some words on a printed page—all of which are clean and uplifting and pertain to historical and doctrinal matters—that arouses such violent antagonism?

“Men ordinarily do not rise up to fight the Bible; they do not organize mobs and incite them to shed the blood of others because such persons believe in the scripture of the Old World. … The violent opposition to the Book of Mormon is one of the great evidences of its divinity. If it were not of God, Lucifer would not overly concern himself with it.” (A New Witness for the Articles of Faith, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985, pp. 59–60, 462.)

Warnings from God

Along with Nephi’s assessment of the enemies of Christ, 2 Nephi 28 gives his warnings to false teachers (2 Ne. 28:15–16), to disciples who are at ease in Zion (2 Ne. 28:24–25), to those who hearken to men’s precepts (2 Ne. 28:26), to those who are angry because of the Restoration and the Book of Mormon (2 Ne. 28:27, 29), to those who trust in the arm of flesh (2 Ne. 28:31), and to the Gentiles who reject God (2 Ne. 28:32).

Nephi begins chapter 28 with a statement that he had written as the Spirit constrained him. [2 Ne. 28:1] He bears his testimony of the truth of his words and declares that he knows the worth of the Book of Mormon record. Indeed, he did know and understand the need for the record. This we can do likewise in answering our critics and extending the gospel to the world. An experience I recorded in my journal shows how a Latter-day Saint can apply these principles:

“It was a typical day in Hawaii. Between waves I made friends with another surfer. He would catch a wave, and then it would be my turn. Paddling back after a ride, he asked me where I worked. I told him BYU—Hawaii. His countenance changed, and his response was, ‘So you’re a Mormon, huh?’

“I could read anti-Mormon literature all over his face. I said, ‘You don’t believe everything you read, do you?’

“Our exchanges between waves stopped until he said, ‘You’re the guys that add to the Bible.’

“I responded, ‘I think you’re referring to our belief in the Book of Mormon.’

“He replied, ‘That’s weird stuff—you can’t add to God’s word.’

“After a while, I asked him if he believed that God loved everybody. He said yes. I then asked what made up the Bible. We agreed that the Bible was the word of God given to prophets. My next question was ‘If God had another group of people who lived in another area of the world unknown to the people of the Bible lands, could God, because of his love for them, speak to them also?’

“‘I guess so,’ he said.

“‘That’s exactly what the Book of Mormon is! It’s God’s word through prophets who lived on the American continent.’

“Before departing, I told him that I knew that Jesus Christ is my Savior and that salvation comes through no other name, that He died on the cross, was resurrected, and lives today, and that one day we will all stand before him and be judged according to our works. That startled him. In the literature he had read, Mormons supposedly don’t say things like that. We departed as friends with a greater respect for each other.”

The Book of Mormon may be maligned at times, but it is God’s word. Its teachings will help us counteract the ploys of Satan and further our preparations for the Savior’s second coming.