

“Give Us Strength According to Our Faith

Lesson
24
Summary

Alma 13–16

Scripture Summary:

Men are called as high priests because of their exceeding faith and good works—They are to teach the commandments—Through righteousness they are sanctified and enter into the rest of the Lord—Melchizedek was one of these—Angels are declaring glad tidings throughout the land—They will reveal the actual coming of Christ. [About 82 B.C.]

Alma and Amulek are imprisoned and smitten—The believers and their holy scriptures are burned by fire—These martyrs are received by the Lord in glory—The prison walls are rent and fall—Alma and Amulek are delivered and their persecutors are slain. [About 82—81 B.C.]

Alma and Amulek go to Sidom and establish a church—Alma heals Zeezrom, who joins the Church—Many are baptized and the Church prospers—Alma and Amulek go to Zarahemla. [About 81 B.C.]

The Lamanites destroy the people of Ammonibab—Zoram leads the Nephites to victory over the Lamanites—Alma and Amulek and many others preach the word—They teach that after his resurrection Christ will appear to the Nephites. [About 81—78 B.C.]

Supplemental Holy Land and Jewish insights:

Keeping the Past Before You: Alma teaches a true order of looking forward to the past! In other words, our memory must be “before” us so that we can learn from the past. At the same time, our future is before us as well. In that way we have the advantage of a “wide screen” view of life. “. . . I would cite your minds forward to the time when the Lord God gave these commandments unto his children; and I would that ye should remember . . .” (*Alma 13:1*)

Using the Past to Define the Future: It stands to reason that our earth life was preceded by a past, or in other words, a pre-earth life. Today, this is a doctrine quite unique to Latter-day Saints, yet it is scriptural and the concept of pre-earth life can be found in Jewish writing before Maimonides (about eight hundred years ago) and among the Dead Sea Scrolls (about two thousand years ago). The term “foundation of the world” presupposes a before an earth-as-we-know-it existence. “Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth . . .” (*Psalms 102:25*) “Mine hand also hath laid the foundation of the earth . . .” (*Isaiah 48:13*) “. . . the LORD, which stretcheth forth the heavens, and layeth the foundation of the earth, and formeth the spirit of man within him.” (*Zechariah 12:1*) “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee . . .” (*Jeremiah 1:5*) “. . . for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.” (*John 17:24*)

Better Not Measure God’s Handiwork by Man’s Time: God’s time has a differentiation to man’s time. God is without beginning or ending of days (man’s days). “And thou art after the order of him who was without beginning of days or end of years, from all eternity to all eternity.” (*JST Genesis 6:70*) “. . . every kingdom in its hour, and in its time, and in its season, even according to the decree which God hath made.” (*Doctrine & Covenants 88:61*)

God’s Math is Better Than Man’s Math: Man will think that 100% goes further than 90%. Yet God’s instruction of tithing results in 90% going further than the 100% could. Alma’s reminder of Melchizedek paying tithes was a part of the true order of things. The Jewish view of tithing still has some biblical meaning even though Jews do not have an order or organized way of collecting and distributing tithes. “During Temple times Israelites would set aside a portion of their agricultural products as tithes which were given to the priests, Levites, and alternately to the poor or were to be taken to Jerusalem and eaten there . . .” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Purpose of Tithing Changed When Priesthood Was Lost: “The tithes served the purpose of supporting the priest and Levite who did not have any ancestral holdings of land and were occupied with the Temple service and other ritual duties, of supporting the poor, and of strengthening the position of Jerusalem in the consciousness of all the people of Israel. Basing themselves on the close similarity in sound between the words *te’aser* (give tithes) and *tit’asher* (become rich), Rabbi Johanan said: ‘Give tithes so that you will become rich,’ and Rabbi Akiva added that, ‘tithes are a fence which guards one’s riches.’ After the exile from Erez Israel, pious people became accustomed to give one-tenth of their earnings to charity, although this ‘tithes’ is of comparatively modern origin.” “It is still customary among Orthodox Jews to set aside tithes from all produce of the Land of Israel, and the produce marketed by Tnuva, the large agricultural collective, is tithed at source before it is sold.” “. . . part is . . . used as fodder for animals owned by priests . . . other tithes are distributed to the poor and needy.” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Who Held Priestly Rights? In ancient days, the Levites carried the responsibility of the priesthood. There may have been exceptions such as Nazirites who may have had priestly duties (in that they were not allowed to be by or touch the dead) yet were not from the tribe of Levi. Today, for the Jews, the priesthood is still not an acquired, but a hereditary, right. “All priests (*kohanim*) and Levites (*levi'im*) are descendants of the tribe of Levi, but priests are a distinct subgroup, the heirs of Aaron, the first High Priest. The distinction given to the tribe of Levi to serve as Levites is explained in the Bible as having been based on their zealotry toward God after the sin of the Golden Calf. Aaron's special distinction as priest was based upon his being Moses' brother and his role as Moses' mouthpiece before Pharaoh. The importance of maintaining the hereditary integrity of the priesthood can be seen from the fact that when the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity after the destruction of the First Temple, all those who claimed priestly rank but were unable to produce documentary evidence of their descent from Aaron were disqualified (Ezra 2:62).” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Biblical Priestly Duties and Organization: “The principal duties of the priests were those connected with performing the sacrificial service. They would also serve as teachers and instructors in the laws of the Torah. In the course of time, the number of priests increased to such an extent that it was necessary to divide them into twenty-four groups. Each group (*mishmar*) served in the Temple in rotation, one for each week. In addition, each group was subdivided into several families who each served one day. This arrangement gave every priest an opportunity of discharging his duty. However, at the three main annual festivals, Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot, all the twenty-four divisions officiated simultaneously.” “Levites were entitled to serve . . . as assistants to the priests.” “. . . The duties and privileges of priests are now limited to pronouncing the priestly benediction on festivals (and Sabbaths in Israel), the symbolic redemption of the firstborn males on the 31st day after birth (*pidyon ha-ben*) and the precedence of a *kohen* at functions such as the Torah reading.” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*) Calling for a “Kohen” when the Torah reading is done implies the special spiritual nature that the priests had to understand the word of God.

Rejection of Priests and Martyrdom: In Alma's day, the lawyers and judges of the land rejected the priestly teachings and those who accepted them. Their persecution and ultimate death was a martyrdom that resulted in their heavenly reward. “Jewish history is replete with examples of those willing to die for their faith from Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who in the Book of Daniel refused to worship an idol and thus endangered their lives, up to the present generation of Soviet Jews who suffer indescribable hardships rather than give up their Jewishness. Under Antiochus Epiphanes, Hellenizers applied violent methods toward the Jews. The Fourth Book of Maccabees is almost entirely a sermon on the meaning and glory of self-sacrifice. Whereas in Christian and Muslim thought martyrdom is chiefly regarded as the act of individuals warranting canonization as saints, in Judaism it remains a task for each and every Jew to fulfill if the appropriate moment should come.” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Heavenly Reward for Righteous Martyrdom: The wall sculpture at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem by Naphtali Bezem's includes a panel depicting Jews being brought into the slave/extermination camps. Underneath is a “broken woman” representing the broken Jewish family line. Next to her is a broken fish with wings. A fish is sometimes used as an art metaphor for the spirit. It's wings seem to represent an ascension to heaven, a reward for martyrdom. It reminds me of Alma's response to Amulek's plea to have Alma use his prophetic priestly power to stop the carnage. “. . . Alma said . . . the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory; and he doth suffer . . . that the people may do this thing unto them . . . that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them . . . may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them . . .” (*Alma 14:11*)

The Power of Memory – with the Lord: Not a thing will escape our memories. Yet, for those who turn to Him, The Lord stands by every harrowing recollection with peace, power, comfort and salvation. “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;” (*Isaiah 61:1*)

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