

# Grace in the Book of Mormon

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Teachings of the Book of Mormon, published in 1830, sometimes stand in tension with ideas of grace that emerged in late antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the modern era. These Book of Mormon usages reach back into the ideas of grace that are more at home in the worlds of the Bible and the ancient Mediterranean. In teaching that grace is a manifestation of God's goodness to humankind, and that it is closely aligned with mercy and Christ's Atonement to meet the demands of justice and make salvation possible, Book of Mormon usages of grace largely parallel the meanings of *hesed* (mercy, Hebrew) from the Old Testament, together with the social concepts that prevailed in the ancient world that all gifts give rise to reciprocal obligations. In essence, grace in the Book of Mormon necessarily enables and encourages disciples to try to restore broken covenant relationships by finding their way back into God's presence, reciprocating his mercy and goodness, and thus enjoying life and eternal rest with him, embraced by his love and outstretched arms.

The word grace appears thirty-one times in the Book of Mormon, in twenty-seven verses found in the words of Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, the two Almas, Mormon, and Moroni. This chapter does not provide an exhaustive analysis of grace in the Book of Mormon. Rather, my goal here is to give an overview of the meaning of grace in the Book of Mormon to

When I was twelve, a young friend whose father was a local pastor told me that I was not a Christian because Mormons don't believe in Christ's grace. My questions about grace and salvation eventually led me to study Greek and Roman classics as well as the Bible. In graduate study, I learned that the Greek word for grace, *charis*, has several usages, including giving compliments about a person's gracefulness and beauty, but when used in the sense of giving favor or in any context of a relationship between people, the word always has a connotation that the person giving grace expected something in return. The giver expected return favors, service, gratitude, honor, and obedience. These *charis* relationships were generally between people of unequal status, such as a king and a commoner.

Reading the New Testament with this knowledge in mind, I see that grace is not the free, one-way, permanent gift that some Christians say it is. Augustine, Luther, and others used neo-Platonic philosophies to create a new paradigm of grace that requires little or nothing of recipients to receive salvation. I have become aware of several New Testament commentators who acknowledge this shift in meaning.

The New Testament teaches that receiving God's grace leads to the formation of a reciprocal or covenant relationship—informing the very nature of the Father's gift of his Son that is extended to us. This understanding has increased my appreciation for the Atonement of Jesus Christ and my desire to keep and renew covenants and endure to the end. I sincerely hope understanding a little about the theological and linguistic history of grace will intellectually and spiritually benefit all readers in these and so many other ways.

In my book *Relational Grace: The Reciprocal and Binding Covenant of Charis* (BYU Studies, 2015), the first eight chapters review reciprocity and gift exchange in ancient cultures, in classical Greek, Roman, and Jewish usage, in the Bible, and in Christian history from ancient to modern times. This chapter, number nine, shows that Book of Mormon teachings resonate with the ancient understanding of grace and give us precious and plain truths of salvation. Final chapters explicate the meaning of grace in LDS doctrine and scholarship.

show that grace is regularly associated there with reciprocal obligations and to situate the Book of Mormon broadly within the history of grace. No teaching of the Book of Mormon implies that grace, or the coming or returning to God, is available to humans outside of a reciprocal relationship between God and humanity. These usages will be reviewed here sequentially and also thematically.

Much more frequently used but conceptually related to the idea of grace are other relational terms, such as *mercy*, *mercies*, and *merciful*, which together appear about 150 times in the Book of Mormon, with *love* and *loved* being used some 68 times. These and other similar terms in the Book of Mormon strongly cultivate the importance of reciprocal relationships between righteous individuals and their God. Thus, the following discussion will first survey all the places in the Book of Mormon where the word *grace* explicitly appears, author by author. It will then look at King Benjamin's speech and other sermons or texts, which, although they do not use the word *grace*, are nonetheless also crucial to understanding the Book of Mormon's teachings about how one can obtain salvation from death and hell through grace, covenantal service, repentance, and obedience. All of this is made possible only by maintaining a loyal and thankful relationship with Christ, the Redeemer, Lord, and Savior.

### Explicit Mentions of Grace in the Book of Mormon

Although all authors who contributed to the Book of Mormon likely understood the important formation and operation of the covenant relations between God and his people (which afforded blessings contingent upon the performance of righteous responsibilities),<sup>1</sup> only seven writers in the Book of Mormon refer to grace explicitly. The insights added by each of these authors reflect their own times, circumstances, needs, and desires, as they urgently wrote about the covenants of God with his people. In this religious context, these writers speak of the grace and goodness God has promised to give to those who will have him to be their God, and at the same time they remind the people of the commitments and obligations they willingly and lovingly have taken

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1. See, for example, Noel B. Reynolds, "Understanding Christian Baptism through the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2012): 4–37; Victor L. Ludlow, "Covenant(s)," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 217–18.

upon themselves as their part of the reciprocal covenant relationship between themselves and God.

**Lehi.** The word *grace* appears in Lehi's words only twice, in his blessing to his son Jacob, but the word *mercy* appears from the beginning of his calling as a prophet. Lehi painfully witnessed the unfaithfulness of the people in Jerusalem, which would lead to the destruction of the Temple and the Holy City. He also suffered physical agonies during his family's arduous journey to the New World and was torn by internal strife among his own sons. In facing these challenges, Lehi found refuge in the assurances given to him by revelation that all the inhabitants of the earth could eventually be blessed and preserved by the Lord God Almighty, to which he exclaimed: "Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power, and goodness, and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth; and because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish!" (1 Ne. 1:14). In that vision, it was plainly made manifest to Lehi that a messiah would come to redeem the world (1 Ne. 1:19).

At the end of Lehi's life, as he blessed his son Jacob, Lehi spoke about the relationship that would exist between that messiah and those who would receive the benefits of his redemption. On the Messiah's part, he would minister to people in the flesh (2 Ne. 2:4), offering himself "a sacrifice for sin." Lehi affirmed that "redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth" (2 Ne. 2:6). Lehi is evidently thinking very broadly here, speaking of a fullness of the various aspects of grace founded on this reciprocal relationship. As Lehi goes on to state, the grace of the Holy Messiah operates together with his "merits and mercy" (2 Ne. 2:8). For Lehi, grace exists within a constellation of divine virtues—God's truth, dependability, holiness, and mercy, even to the laying down of his own life (2 Ne. 2:10). This Atonement, however, would be efficacious only to those who would serve him and would come with "a broken heart and a contrite spirit" (2 Ne. 2:7).

Through this grace, everyone will stand in the presence of God to be judged and may "dwell in the presence of God" (2 Ne. 2:8, 10). Through his covenant, which God will always remember (Lev. 26:42), all who have died will be resurrected (2 Ne. 2:8); and here Lehi may be thinking of the people in Jerusalem, which he knows has been destroyed, as well as remembering deceased family members.

**Jacob.** No doubt influenced by his father's words, Lehi's son Jacob mentions grace on four occasions in his great covenant speech in 2 Nephi 9–10. Jacob locates grace together with God's wisdom, mercy,

and greatness (2 Ne. 9:8, 53). In a temple context and speaking shortly after the temple in the land of Nephi was completed and dedicated, Jacob distinctively refers to “grace divine” (2 Ne. 10:25), and he sees the extension of God’s greatness, grace, and mercy coming through the great “covenants of the Lord,” “his condescensions,” and his covenantal promises that Lehi’s “seed shall not utterly be destroyed,” but that God would preserve them to become “a righteous branch unto the house of Israel” (2 Ne. 9:53).

In order for this salvific relationship to materialize, those bound to God through his covenant, as Jacob taught, must reconcile themselves “to the will of God,” and “remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved” (2 Ne. 10:24). If covenant people do not submit to the will of the devil and to the flesh, God will then cause their spirits to rise, to be protected “from everlasting death by the power of the atonement,” that people “may be received into the eternal kingdom of God” and there praise God in thankful return for his divine grace (2 Ne. 10:25). In this powerful temple sermon, Jacob elaborates in detail about the covenantal relationship between God and his people, including the services that both he and his people are obliged to perform under what Jacob calls “the merciful plan of the great Creator” (2 Ne. 9:6).

**Nephi.** On only two occasions does Nephi, Jacob’s older brother, refer to grace. First, in the text immediately after Jacob’s temple sermon, Nephi affirms his father Lehi’s declaration that the fullness of grace is to be found in the Holy Messiah and also ratifies the explanation that Jacob had given about the covenant relationship between God and his people. Nephi here not only looks back to the covenant made by God with Lehi and his posterity, but also his soul delights “in the covenants of the Lord which he hath made to our fathers,” evidently referring to the covenants made by God to Moses, Abraham, and others (2 Ne. 11:5). Realizing this full array of covenants that established durable promises and obligations by his fathers, Nephi concurrently delights in God’s “grace, and in his justice, and power, and mercy in the great and eternal plan of deliverance from death” (2 Ne. 11:5). To Jacob’s panoply of grace, wisdom, mercy, and greatness, Nephi adds God’s “justice and power,” and ties grace into not only the merciful plan by which the world was created, but the “eternal plan” through which God’s people can be delivered from death.

Second, knowing the value and importance of that relationship, Nephi, later in the text, explains why he works so hard to persuade his

posterity and his *brethren*, faithful or recalcitrant, “to believe in Christ,” the Messiah, and “to be *reconciled to God*,” preserving or restoring their good standing within the covenantal relationship between them and the Lord, “for we know that it is *by grace that we are saved, after all we can do*” (2 Ne. 25:23). Here Nephi’s famous words, as indicated by the italics, echo almost verbatim the words of Jacob in 2 Nephi 10:24,<sup>2</sup> where Jacob admonished *the brethren* to reconcile themselves to the will of God and to remember that “*after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that you are saved.*” Nephi’s phrase “be reconciled to God” is a shortened allusion to Jacob’s slightly longer phrases “reconcile yourselves to *the will of God*” and “after ye are reconciled to God.”<sup>3</sup> When Nephi says that “*we know that it is by grace that we are saved,*” he speaks not only for himself but also implicitly recognizes Jacob as the source of this expression of their belief. Moreover, when Nephi refers to “*after all we can do,*” he would expect his readers to recall what Jacob had previously said, when Jacob explained that salvation can operate through the grace of God only after one is reconciled unto God. “After all we can do” is then an elliptical reference to Jacob’s “after ye are reconciled unto God,” thereby maintaining the covenantal relationship through divine atonement and human reconciliation of any infractions, thereby allowing the grace, justice, wisdom, power, mercy, and greatness of God to operate so that we “are saved” (2 Ne. 10:24; 25:23).

Joseph Spencer, who draws many connections between 2 Nephi 10:24 and 2 Nephi 25:23, places these verses in the context of the whole book of 2 Nephi and the purpose for which Nephi kept his record. What “Nephi and Jacob ask their readers and hearers to do is to be reconciled to God.” This happens when people “stop holding out against God’s purposes, when we ‘yield’ and therefore cease, at last, to be ‘an enemy to

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2. These two verses may be seen as chiasmic parallels, suggesting that they are to be contemplated as a pair. Welch sees the book of 2 Nephi as a five-element chiasm, with Jacob’s commentary of Isaiah (2 Ne. 6–10), having 2 Nephi 10 at its end, corresponding to Nephi’s commentary on Isaiah (2 Ne. 25–30), having 2 Nephi 25 at its beginning. John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), 201, available online at <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1131&index=9>.

3. Stephen Ehat also has noted that both of these verses use the word “after” and not the word “because,” thus avoiding the idea that grace is the result of works. The requirement of works, or “all we can do,” then leads to reconciling oneself to God; after a person is reconciled he can then be saved by grace. Stephen Ehat, email to John W. Welch, May 15, 2015.

God,' as the angel put it to King Benjamin (Mosiah 3:19),' and enter into a covenant to keep God's commandments (Mosiah 5:5–8). Spencer suggests that "Nephi took the doctrine of grace to be most relevant when he recognized the real temptation human beings feel to resist the revelatory. . . . Grace is what we are ignoring whenever we resist God's gentle (or not-so-gentle) entreaties. . . . If we can be still . . . we might know, as Nephi did, that God is God, and that it is God who . . . saves by grace."<sup>4</sup>

Discussion of Nephi's view of grace is incomplete without connecting it to his message in 2 Nephi 31. In that chapter, it becomes clear that "all we can do" is to recognize Christ as the Savior, follow him, repent, enter into the covenant of baptism, receive the Holy Ghost, remain steadfast in hope and love, and endure to the end. Those who keep the covenants will then receive eternal life through grace.

**Alma.** The next primary author to use the word grace in the Book of Mormon is Alma the Younger. In three of his most powerful speeches—first, in addressing Nephites in Zarahemla who appear to have slackened in their covenantal commitments; second, to faithful recent arrivals from the land of Nephi now resettled in the city of Gideon; and third, in addressing the apostate Nehorites in Ammonihah—Alma turns powerfully to grace as a crucial element in maintaining righteousness before God. Like Lehi and Jacob before him, Alma couples grace with mercy. He goes on in describing the Son of God as being full of grace, mercy, truth, equity, patience, and longsuffering (Alma 5:48; 9:26; 13:9).

On God's part in this grace relationship, Alma emphasizes that God will "take away the sins of the world" and will be "quick to hear the cries of his people and to answer their prayers" (Alma 9:26). On the part of the beneficiaries, Alma enumerates that they must "steadfastly believe on his name" (Alma 5:48) and humble themselves before God (Alma 7:3), repent and obey the will of God, and petition God, "supplicating of his grace" (Alma 7:3).

As the high priest of the people in the land of Zarahemla, but having recently stepped down after nine years of serving also as the chief judge, Alma shows particular interest in the judicial aspects of mercy, equity, and justice as he invites his people to be faithful, repent, and maintain, individually and as a people together, their relationship with God. Thus, in his words to Corianton in Alma 39–42, Alma names the path to salvation

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4. Joseph M. Spencer, "What Can We Do? Reflections on 2 Nephi 25:23," *Religious Educator* 15, no. 2 (2014): 33, 36–37.

as “the plan of redemption” (Alma 39:18; 42:11, 13), “the plan of restoration” (Alma 41:2), “the great plan of salvation” (Alma 42:5) “the great plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8, 16), and “the plan of mercy” (Alma 42:15, 31), but he could just as well have called it “the plan of grace.” Alma explains that God’s plan gives mankind time to repent—a space of time between sin and judgment (Alma 42:4), and this is the essence of mercy. If people were to see immediate judgment and punishment for their sins, it would be easy to avoid sin, there would not be any need for faith, and there would not be a space of time for people to examine their hearts or to come to themselves, and the plan of salvation would be frustrated (Alma 42:5). Delayed judgment allows for voluntary, not compulsory, repentance, and that condition makes it possible for mercy to take effect and not destroy justice (Alma 42:13). Mercy defers justice, but does not rob justice, for there will still be a judgment. In Alma’s view, God’s grace extends to a time or space for repentance to occur.

**Mormon.** The word *grace* makes an important appearance in Mormon’s editorial writings. First, in describing the baptisms at the waters of Mormon, Mormon reflects wistfully upon the righteous successes of Alma the Elder, whose posterity would keep the records that were finally entrusted to Mormon. Looking back on that idyllic moment, Mormon was undoubtedly drawn to the beauties of that place, not only because he shared the name of that place of covenanting, but also because of his great disappointment that his own people had turned from their covenants and “that the day of grace was passed with them, both temporally and spiritually” (Morm. 2:15). He looked back on that as a time when 204 souls were “filled with the grace of God” (Mosiah 18:16), and when their priests for their recompense received only “the grace of God, that they might wax strong in the spirit, having the knowledge of God, that they might teach with power and authority from God” (Mosiah 18:26), and in “doing these things, they did abound in the grace of God” (Mosiah 27:5).

Commenting on the wicked condition that plagued the people of Nephi during the book of Helaman, Mormon devoutly prayed that God might “grant, in his great fulness, that men might be brought unto repentance and good works, that they might be restored unto grace for grace, according to their works” (Hel. 12:24). Knowing as he did the impending demise of the Nephite civilization, Mormon realized that some will not be brought back unto repentance and that indeed some will ultimately be cast out, not being restored to a reciprocal “grace for grace” relationship with God (Hel. 12:25), who would, as a mother hen, have gathered these people unto himself, but they would not (3 Ne. 10:5–6).



In his own day, four centuries later, Mormon could not find grace operating among his people (Morm. 2:15), who had come out “in open rebellion against their God,” in effect repudiating the covenants and the relationship they could and should have maintained with God. Nevertheless, in each of the three letters that he wrote to his son Moroni, Mormon recognized the grace of God that still extended to him and to his few righteous followers. In the first, having survived several initial catastrophic military disasters, Mormon acknowledged that he was able to speak to the congregation of his beloved brethren only “by the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, and his holy will, because of the gift of his calling” (Moro. 7:2). As his second letter begins, grace is once again on Mormon’s mind, who prays continually to the Father in the name of his Holy Child Jesus that he, “through his infinite goodness and grace, will keep you through the endurance of faith on his name to the end” (Moro. 8:3).<sup>5</sup> Mormon’s third letter concludes by exhorting Moroni to be faithful, hopeful, and reassured that through God’s mercy and longsuffering, the grace of God the Father will “abide with you forever” (Moro. 9:25–26).

**Moroni.** Having received this final encouragement from his father, Moroni goes on to complete the plates of Mormon, adding the books of Ether and his own book of Moroni to the final record. From Moroni’s perspective, the importance of men coming to God in order for them to partake of and benefit from God’s grace takes prominence: “If men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. . . . My grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27). In other words, all must humble themselves, putting themselves in a relationship with God that recognizes him as the Lord, with themselves as hopeful beneficiaries. If they have faith and trust in this relationship, the Father promises to make their weakness a strength.

No doubt, the invitation to “come unto me” in Ether 12:27 echoes the invitation of Jesus Christ, who speaks in the first part of the book of Ether, saying, “Come unto me all ye Gentiles, and I will show unto you the greater things,” and “Come unto me, O ye House of Israel, and it shall be made manifest unto you how great things the Father hath laid

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5. Likewise, four late New Testament letters, perhaps also authored in times of distress by Paul and John, begin by recognizing that it is by grace, mercy, and peace that they might yet communicate encouragement to their people, albeit in times of great trouble (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4; 2 John 1:3).

up for you, from the foundation of the world” (Ether 4:13–14). Moroni now affirms that he has “prayed unto the Lord that he would give unto the Gentiles grace, that they might have charity” (Ether 12:36), in particular that the Gentiles would be charitable in not rejecting the Book of Mormon because of the weaknesses of their writers (Ether 12:35). Moroni recognizes that the Gentiles have been given a “talent” and therefore were in some kind of stewardship relationship with God, who expected them to use that talent in doing the will of the Master. As for Moroni, however, having himself been a faithful servant to the Master, the Lord assures him that “because thou hast seen thy weakness thou shalt be made strong, even unto the sitting down in the place which I have prepared in the mansions of my Father” (Ether 12:37). In other words, Moroni is told that he will successfully enjoy the perfection of his relationship with the Lord.

In much the same way that Mormon had concluded his final epistle to Moroni (by invoking a blessing upon his son that the grace of God would abide with him forever [Moro. 9:26]), Moroni concludes his final editorial insertion in the book of Ether by commending Jesus to his readers that they might seek a relationship with Christ so that “the grace of God the Father, and also the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of them, may be and abide in you forever” (Ether 12:41).

Reiterating these ideas in his culminating conclusion, Moroni invites all people to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him,” and to “love God with all your might, mind and strength,” promising “then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ” (Moro. 10:32). By coming to Christ, denying oneself of all ungodliness, and loving God with all one’s might, a grace relationship is created so that the obligor “may be perfected” in and by his Lord. And on God’s part, sanctification in Christ will be brought about “by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ” (Moro. 10:33). All of this is possible through the reciprocally obliging “covenant of the Father” (Moro. 10:33), bestowing upon the covenant observers the benefit of “the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot” (Moro. 10:33).

### **Thematic Uses of Grace in the Book of Mormon**

Thematically, grace is used in the Book of Mormon in conjunction with such covenantal teachings as returning service and thanks to God, repentance, relating to God, salvation, and the loss of one’s access to the grace relationship.

**What Is Required in Return for Grace?** As King Benjamin teaches of mercy, atonement, service, obedience, wisdom, power, and justice (Mosiah 2:39; 3:26; 4:2; 5:15), he teaches that disciples should serve God and others, even though in so doing they still remain unprofitable servants and unable to repay God for his gifts; the very air we breathe is a gift from God (Mosiah 2:22). Even though no one can come close to repaying God for his offer of forgiveness, resurrection, and eternal life, there is still much that disciples must do. Benjamin does not say that nothing is required in return. God has given the gift of life to mankind, and when his children respond to God with obedience, he blesses them in return, and they are forever in his debt (Mosiah 2:21–25). This kind of recurring reciprocity was practiced in the ancient world: a person of means would give something of value, the receiver was then obliged to respond with gratitude and obedience, the giver would give more gifts, and the cycle continued indefinitely.<sup>6</sup> The recognition of this obligation to keep God’s commandments and praise and thank him parallels the ancient idea of reciprocity. Benjamin’s teachings thus align with the view of *hesed* and *charis* in the ancient Mediterranean world. (See the sidebar on p. 120.)

**Grace and Repentance.** Helaman 12:24 commands men to remember God and his greatness: “And may God grant, in his great fulness, that men might be brought unto repentance and good works, that they might be restored unto grace for grace, according to their works.” The phrase “that they might” suggests that when God brings people to repentance and good works, then they will be restored unto grace for grace, and the final clause clarifies that grace is restored “according to their works.” While this verse may say that grace is dependent on works, it needs to be taken in context of this chapter, which lists many ways that people are foolish, proud, selfish, and forgetful of God. The message is that those whose works are evil will not attain grace until they remember God and repent. Repentance is necessary to obtain grace; disciples must become true followers of God. One of the best examples of this in the Book of Mormon is the conversion of Alma the Younger, who was one of the vilest of sinners (Mosiah 28:4). But after his conversion, Alma

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6. Anciently, grace was a “code which recognized that reciprocal favors initiated a sequence of exchanged kindnesses. The code enjoyed the endorsement of the most basic unwritten law.” Bonnie MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace: Charis in Early Greek Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 22.

labored throughout the rest of his life to build up the Church by working to help others repent and receive the Holy Ghost (Alma 36:23–24).

The Book of Mormon urges all to repent, which parallels the ancient virtue of loyalty to those who had given *charis*. Because people cannot be saved in their sins (Alma 11:34, 36, 37), we gain full access to the Savior’s grace and can be saved from spiritual death through repentance. Two brief examples illustrate this point. First, when being taught the gospel by Aaron, Lamoni’s father declared that he was willing to give up all his sins to know God (Alma 22:18). Second, repentant Lamanites who became Ammonites buried their swords rather than shed blood again (Alma 24:12–17). These examples demonstrate how the Book of Mormon teaches that those who truly received the gift of the Atonement reciprocally did all in their power to show their thankfulness, be obedient, and endure to the end.

**One’s Relationship with God Is of Supreme Importance.** Ether 12:27 teaches, “And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.” I read this as God giving men weakness to cause them to realize that he is in charge and that they must seek a relationship with him. Pride is an enemy; people must become humble before him; God alone has the power to make individuals and communities strong. Humanity’s relationship with God is everything, and that relationship must be founded on humility.

Perhaps Moroni 10:32–33 stresses grace more than any other verse in the Book of Mormon:

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.

The “if, then” structure throughout this verse marks the cause and effect: those who seek God with all they have and deny themselves of all ungodliness will be forgiven and will be acceptable because of God’s grace. Then comes the amazing promise that they may become perfect

in Christ. Those who receive this grace cannot possibly deny the power of God. If they become perfect in Christ, they become sanctified. It is God's power, not theirs, that makes them whole. It is because of their relationship with both God and Christ that they become recipients of grace. One does not achieve this reward quickly or easily. In fact, these final verses from the book of Moroni are mirrored by the very first chapters of that same book (chapters 1–6), which describe several ordinances, actions, and commandments necessary to achieve salvation—some of which must be repeated indefinitely (such as meeting often to “partake of bread and wine, in remembrance of the Lord Jesus” [Moro. 6:6]).

**What We Are Saved From and How We Are Saved.** The authors of the Book of Mormon teach that there are two kinds of death that we must overcome in order to become exalted—physical and spiritual. As I will discuss below, Jesus Christ's gift we call grace will save all people from physical death. It is free to all people; all will be resurrected (Alma 40:4). The Savior's gift can also save people from spiritual death if they keep God's commandments. Book of Mormon prophets teach that only those who fully engage with the Savior's atoning sacrifice are able to escape spiritual death and receive eternal life and exaltation.

Another aspect of grace in 2 Nephi 10:23–24 (mentioned above) is agency, or free will. “Remember that ye are free to act for yourselves. . . . Reconcile yourselves to the will of God . . . and remember . . . that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved. Wherefore, may God raise you from death by the power of the resurrection, and also from everlasting death by the power of the atonement, that ye may be received into the eternal kingdom of God, that ye may praise him through grace divine.” It is clear in this verse that certain actions are required for individuals to reach God's kingdom. They cannot depend on grace alone, though grace is absolutely essential and necessary. In addition to providing this grace, God requires individuals to choose, to work, to act. Both grace and works are essential to this plan.

Physical resurrection is the Savior's free gift given to all who have lived upon the earth. The prophet Alma taught in Alma 11:42–45 that God will provide salvation from physical death for all: “Now, there is a death which is called a temporal death; and the death of Christ shall loose the bands of this temporal death, that all shall be raised from this temporal death” (v. 42). Resurrection is an essential part of God's plan for us to receive a body and is contingent on the Atonement. Even though all people will receive resurrection, it will not be all at the same time. The righteous will be resurrected first (Mosiah 15:22).

Spiritual death is a separation from God or being denied access to God's presence. While God will eventually bring all into his presence to be judged (Alma 42:23), for some, this reunion will be temporary. To truly overcome spiritual death is to enter God's kingdom and dwell with him eternally. Multiple Book of Mormon authors make it clear that faith in Christ, repentance from sin, baptism, obedience to commandments, and enduring to the end in faith are essential for salvation from spiritual death (especially in 2 Ne. 31 and 3 Ne. 11). Being reconciled unto God or released from spiritual death occurs through keeping one's sacred covenants with the Lord. I see this as reciprocal grace.

Some dissidents within the Book of Mormon argued that salvation required absolutely no individual effort and were characterized as teaching popular but false doctrines. The idea that all will enter the kingdom of God whether or not they have repented is condemned in the Book of Mormon through the dramatic silencing of these dissenters. They substituted their system of free grace for the grace offered by the Savior.<sup>7</sup> The dissenter Nehor taught the Nephites a sort of salvation by grace that was unconditional. This doctrine became popular among the people and had to be condemned by the prophets:

He [Nehor] had gone about among the people, preaching to them that which he termed to be the word of God, bearing down against the church; declaring unto the people that every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people. And he also testified unto the people 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. And it came to pass that he did teach these things so much that many did believe on his words, even so many that they began to support him and give him money. (Alma 1:3–5)

In my reading of this text, Nehor rejected the need for the transformative power of the Atonement, since I believe he promoted an easy and convenient form of grace in which “all mankind should be saved at the last day.”<sup>8</sup> The Book of Mormon emphatically teaches that this particular

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7. See, generally, John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2008), 112, for an analysis of the distinctions among the dissenters Sherem, Nehor, and Korihor.

8. Welch, *Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon*, 207.

interpretation of grace is a false doctrine (Alma 1:14–16). It hindered many Nephites who followed Nehor and others of his order from truly repenting of their sins.

In an additional example, Korihor drew upon his followers' desire for control and self-righteousness, as he argued that one should carve out success through one's own intellect, brawn, and skills. Under this philosophy, those who are independently strong will naturally progress without any help from the Savior (see Alma 30:16–17).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, according to Korihor's way of thinking, covenants and grace are not needed. As I have highlighted above, Book of Mormon prophets consistently taught that God required dependence on him alone for salvation.

**Grace Can Be Lost.** Some who once were righteous fell away and lost the grace that they had received. Even the righteous brother of Jared was warned by the Lord that the Spirit would not always strive with him if he continued to forget to pray (Ether 2:15). Throughout the Book of Mormon, we read about dissenters among the Nephites who eventually left the church, refused to repent, and continued to live sinful lives in a state of apostasy, often defecting to the Lamanites. Unless the power of the preaching of the word touched their hearts, as with Aminadab and others mentioned in Helaman chapter 5, dissenters such as Amlici and Amalickiah usually led difficult lives filled with contention, warfare, and often an early death. Nephi told us that the spirit ceased to strive with the Jerusalemites because they rejected the prophets (1 Ne. 7:14). Both the Nephites and the Lamanites eventually rejected the Savior (2 Ne. 26:11; Morm. 5:16) and destroyed each other in combat with merciless slaughter (Morm. 4:5); their whole societies lost grace. Mormon reports that “the day of grace was passed with them” (Morm. 2:15).

## Conclusion

In sum, the Book of Mormon teaches that grace and salvation are available only through coming to Christ, following him, and enduring to the end. This point of enduring to the end is taught in nine Book of Mormon verses. For example, Amaleki exhorts his brethren, “Yea, come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him, and continue in fasting and praying, and endure to the end; and as the Lord liveth ye will be saved” (Omni 1:26). The Savior's personal teaching included,

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9. I note great insights on this topic from Camille Fronk Olson's devotional “What's So Amazing about Grace?” November 10, 2009, at BYU–Hawaii, available online at <http://devotional.byuh.edu/node/386>.

“Behold, I am the law, and the light. Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live; for unto him that endureth to the end will I give eternal life” (3 Ne. 15:9). While this teaching is found only rarely in the New Testament (see Matt. 24:13; Mark 13:13), the Book of Mormon emphasizes the need for continuing in grace as a lifelong endeavor. The reception of grace is not a one-time event, but the extension of and the development of a comfortable, loving, committed and endearing relationship between God and his children. This conceptualization of grace in the Book of Mormon resonates strongly with the ancient concept of *charis*: that of reciprocally obliging gift-giving. Thus, from a religious perspective rooted in the ancient world and amply reflected in the Book of Mormon, grace is an everlasting series of offerings and benefactions from God, in response to which the willing receiver reciprocates, as well as possible, aiming to please the Lord, thereby ensuring the formation and continuation of a saving relationship with God.

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