



Lessons from Laman and Lemuel

Elder Neal A. Maxwell

Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

Laman and Lemuel became rebels instead of leaders, resentful instead of righteous--all because of their failure to understand either the character or the purposes of God.



As his prophetic words have just demonstrated, we are so blessed to have President Hinckley!

Brothers and sisters, on very thin pages, thick with meaning, are some almost hidden scriptures. Hence we are urged to *search, feast, and ponder* (see John 5:39; Alma 14:1; Alma 33:2; Moro. 10:3; 2 Ne. 9:51). Especially, however, we should also do more of what Nephi did, namely "liken all scriptures unto [ourselves]" (1 Ne. 19:23).

Illustratively, words which we should so "liken" occur twice with regard to Laman and Lemuel, mistakenly regarded by some as merely "stick

figures." Consider, therefore, how the applications of these next words go far beyond those two: "And thus Laman and Lemuel, . . . did murmur . . . because they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them" (1 Ne. 2:12; see also Mosiah 10:14).

Failing to understand the "dealings" of the Lord with His children--meaning His relations with and treatment of His children--is very fundamental. Murmuring is but one of the symptoms, and not the only consequence either; in fact, brothers and sisters, this failure affects everything else!

To misread something so crucial constitutes a failure to know God, who then ends up being wrongly seen as unreachable, uninvolved, uncaring, and unable--a disabled and diminished Deity, really--about whose seeming limitations, ironically, some then quickly complain.

Early on, Laman rejected the role he should have played, and, instead, wanted to be "top dog in the manger," resenting all the while Nephi's spiritual leadership. Lemuel was not only Laman's dutiful satellite, but he was also his enabler by allowing himself to be "stirred up" by Laman (see 1 Ne. 16:3738). If, instead, Laman had been fully isolated, certain outcomes could have been very different. We have enablers in our society too. They allow themselves to be stirred up against that which is good. They are not entitled to a free pass any more than Lemuel. Like him, their comparative visibility is low, but their hypocrisy is high!

Exhortations given to Laman and Lemuel "were hard to be understood, save a man should inquire of the Lord; and they being hard in their hearts, therefore they did not look unto the Lord as they ought" (1 Ne. 15:3).

This failure to believe in a revealing God was especially basic. Some moderns who wish to distance themselves from God try placing His pavilion firmly in the past. By believing in such a disabled God, people can do pretty much as they please. It is then not many steps further to saying there is no God, therefore no law and no sin! (see 2 Ne. 2:13; see also Alma 30:28).

Like Laman and Lemuel, many today would consign God only to the past; He thereby ceases to be the constant God of yesterday, today, and tomorrow (see 2 Ne. 27:23). Actually, God has the past, present, and future ever before Him, constituting an "eternal 'now'" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith [1976], 220; see also D&C 130:7).

In short, Laman and Lemuel's own lack of character kept them from understanding the perfect character of God! No wonder the Prophet Joseph Smith said, "If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves" (*Teachings*, 343).

Laman and Lemuel did not realize either that a loving God will inevitably be a tutoring Father, who wants His children to be truly happy and to come home. Not understanding God's "dealings" sufficiently, Laman and Lemuel missed the most important attribute of God's character--His love! Thus their murmuring was a symptom of a pathetic pathology.

Laman and Lemuel likewise didn't understand that the "dealings" of God included using prophets to warn people. The Lord had so called Lehi, but Laman and Lemuel were apparently embarrassed by their father's unpopular role and by his stern challenge to Jerusalem's then prevailing mentality.

Spiritually numbed, Laman and Lemuel felt that the people of Jerusalem were undeserving of prophetic criticisms leveled (see 1 Ne. 2:13). Yet a pervasive spiritual decline was actually under way, occurring, as often happens, "in the space of not many years" (Hel. 4:26). A parallel and trampling decline is being missed by so many today, too. Ironically, those engaged in such a lemming-like march to the sea are often proud of their own individualism! Advice is seen as an insult, and counsel as a contraction of their agency.

Fundamental, too, was Laman and Lemuel's not understanding that a tutoring God may require difficult things of His children. The role of adversity is noted in this stern but inspired insight: "Nevertheless the Lord seeth fit to chasten his people; yea, he trieth their patience and their faith" (Mosiah 23:21). Their sad expectation of ease was evident in their bristling over getting the plates from Laban, enduring the harsh wilderness, building a ship, and crossing a vast ocean (see 1 Ne. 34). Dulled and desensitized, Laman and Lemuel simply didn't share Nephi's confidence that the Lord would never command His children to do difficult things, except the Lord first prepares the way (see 1 Ne. 3:7).

Their enormous errors led to almost comical inconsistencies, such as Laman and Lemuel's believing that God could handle mighty Pharaoh and great Egypt's army at the Red Sea all right, but not a local Laban! How many in our time inconsistently subordinate themselves to, and curry favor with, mortal intimidators?

In the final division as between the Lamanites and the Nephites, note the spiritual boundary which preceded the geographical boundary: "I, Nephi, did take my family, . . . and all those who would go with me . . . who believed in the warnings and the revelations of God; wherefore, they did hearken unto my words" (2 Ne. 5:6).

Laman and Lemuel did not partake of the tree of life, which is the love of God (see 1 Ne. 11:25). The love of God for His children is most profoundly expressed in His gift of Jesus as our Redeemer: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). To partake of the love of God is to partake of Jesus' Atonement and the emancipations and joys which it can bring. Clearly,

however, Laman and Lemuel did not have such faith--especially in a Christ yet to come! (see Jarom 1:11).

In contrast, Nephi, "had a great knowledge of the goodness . . . of God," hence Nephi's firm declaration: "I know that [God] loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things" (1 Ne. 1:1; 11:17). If we have a love of God and know His goodness, we will trust Him, even when we are puzzled or perplexed.

Thus Laman and Lemuel did not understand the relationship of mortals with God, and, worse still, they did not really want to understand. They sought to keep their distance from God. Furthermore, being intellectually lazy, they did not count their blessings, when gratitude could have lessened the distance. But it was never inventory time for Laman and Lemuel.

Laman and Lemuel also displayed little lasting spiritual curiosity. Once, true, they asked straightforward questions about the meaning of a vision of the tree, the river, and the rod of iron. Yet their questions were really more like trying to connect doctrinal dots rather than connecting themselves with God and His purposes for them. They certainly did not "liken" the answers to themselves (see 1 Ne. 19:23).

Their contrition never lasted very long, such as in the interval between the appearance of an angel and when Laman and Lemuel resumed murmuring (1 Ne. 3:31). Under duress, once they even superficially acknowledged that they "knew the Lord is with thee [Nephi]" but they soon became exceedingly "rude" in their behavior on the ship (see 1 Ne. 17:55; see also 1 Ne. 18:8, 9). Their periodic violence indicated their resentments weren't merely abstract, intellectual differences.

Laman and Lemuel were intimidated by Laban's power, but their fear of power merely showed the power of fear. Since "perfect love casteth out all fear," their limited capacity to love was thereby very evident (see Moro. 8:16; see also 1 Jn. 4:18). Though unprincipled, most sadly, they were unloving!

Hence, encrusted Laman and Lemuel seldom responded to the tenderness of others. They were strangers to empathy, that eternal attribute. When Lehi exhorted them with all the feeling of a tender or trembling parent, the effects were usually more resentment, evoking cruel responses to parents and siblings (see 1 Ne. 8:37). When Nephi displayed sorrow over their behavior, Laman and Lemuel were "glad" that he was sorry (see 1 Ne. 17:19). Admonitions were bad enough, but to have them come from Nephi!

Easily riled and quick to complain, they could scarcely remember their last rescue long enough to meet their next difficulty. Instead, lacking gospel perspective, the situational cares of the day, like worry over a broken bow, of all things, dominated the things of eternity. Ours, too, is a day of every-man-for-himself situational ethics, as if the Ten Commandments came from a focus group!

Upon arriving at both lands of Bountiful, did Laman and Lemuel really think that such good navigating was mere happenstance? Perhaps Nephi had merely "guessed right" (see Hel. 16:16). Their ingratitude for the Liahona raises the question: What did Laman and Lemuel really think of that remarkable instrument? Was it just a convenient gadget or merely standard equipment on every ship?

Ironically, many like Laman and Lemuel who are the first to demand signs are then the first to discount them. Some demand more miracles even while consuming a daily menu of manna and forgetting its remarkable Source.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, preferred to periodic miracles is having the Holy Ghost as a "constant companion" (see D&C 121:46). Ever to be remembered, however, is that the Holy Ghost, while a Comforter, is not an intruder!

Laman and Lemuel's rejection of the prophets and the scriptures meant there could be no useful likening or rehearsals of remembrance and no freshening of personal revelation to them for their time. They simply did not understand that God's ways are higher than man's ways (see Isa. 55:9). They enjoyed intellectual "slumming" in their portable equivalent of the prideful "great and spacious building" (see 1 Ne. 8:26, 31).

Hence Laman and Lemuel became rebels instead of leaders, resentful instead of righteous--all because of their failure to understand either the character or the purposes of God and His dealings with His children.

As to their spiritual significance, Laman and Lemuel were sad ciphers. True, we could know more facts about them, but it would not change the "bottom line." If, in some respects, they seem to be undeveloped characters, it is because theirs was a haunting emptiness, which could have been filled by the "love of God." In vision, there was the forlorn scene when Lehi cast his eyes anxiously about, searching for Laman and Lemuel that "perhaps [he] might see them." Finally, Lehi saw them, "but they would not . . . partake of the fruit" (1 Ne. 8:17-18; see also 1 Ne. 11:25; 8:35; 2 Ne. 5:20). Of all self-inflicted punishments, this eight-word epitaph describes the most awful and consequential!

Mercifully, brothers and sisters, the rich Restoration gives us added ways to understand the dealings of God with His children, including with each of us personally. We can partake of His love by applying Jesus' glorious Atonement in order to become more like Him. By likening precious scriptures to ourselves we will hasten that precious process! May we so do, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen!

[◀ Previous](#) | [Next ▶](#)

© 2007 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved. [Rights and use information.](#) [Privacy policy](#)