

## *“Covenants Connect Us to Heaven”*

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One of the most remarkable episodes in recorded history is found in chapter 24 of the book of Alma. It involves the experience of thousands of Lamanites who were converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ by Ammon and his brethren in the century prior to the birth of the Savior. Shortly after their conversion, these good Saints, who became known as the people of Ammon, faced a momentous challenge, one as dramatic as could be imagined. Some of their fellow countrymen who had not accepted the gospel had begun “to make preparations for war against” them.<sup>1</sup> And they were planning a lot more than a verbal assault on the ideology or good name of these recent converts. They literally “took up arms” against the people of Ammon with the intent “to destroy their brethren.”<sup>2</sup>

Facing this daunting prospect, the leaders of this group decided to “hold a council” to determine “what they should do to defend themselves against” the impending attack.<sup>3</sup> The course they chose was most unusual. “Not one soul” of them was willing to “take up arms against their brethren,” nor would they “even make any preparations for war.”<sup>4</sup> This was not because they lacked the weapons or the expertise to defend themselves in such a manner. Prior to their conversion they were described as a people “whose hearts delight[ed] in the shedding of blood.”<sup>5</sup>

But rather than relying on conventional weapons and tactics, these faithful Saints determined to trust in the power of covenants with God. Instead of taking up their swords, they resolved to lay them aside, “covenanting with God, that rather than shed the blood of their brethren they would give up their own lives,”<sup>6</sup> secure in the belief that “if our brethren destroy us, behold, we shall go to our God and shall be saved.”<sup>7</sup>

Acting on this resolve, they buried their weapons of war “deep in the earth.”<sup>8</sup> And when their attackers arrived on the battle scene determined to conquer them, these covenant people of God “went out to meet them, and prostrated themselves before them to the earth, and began to call on the name of the Lord; and thus they were in this attitude when the Lamanites began to fall upon them, and began to slay them with the sword.”<sup>9</sup>

The immediate temporal result was the slaughter of more than a thousand of those faithful, innocent Saints.<sup>10</sup> But the more important, more eternal results soon became apparent. As it began to dawn on many of the attackers what was happening, their hearts were immediately changed, and “they threw down their weapons of war . . . ; and they came down even as their brethren, relying upon the mercies of those whose arms were lifted to slay them.”<sup>11</sup>

The Book of Mormon records the eventual outcome:

“And it came to pass that the people of God were joined that day by more than the number who had been slain; and those who had been slain were righteous people, therefore we have no reason to doubt but what they were saved.”<sup>12</sup>

There is perhaps no written account that more vividly illustrates the eternal power and impact of covenants or that more impressively reminds us that such power will often come as the result of sacrifice—real sacrifice that is much more than symbolic or superficial.

The particular covenant that the people of Ammon entered into with God was unique to them and to their distinctive situation. But the overarching principle about the critical role that covenants play in the accomplishment of God’s plans for His children is fully applicable to us today and, indeed, to all of God’s children throughout the history of the world.

Covenants are central to God’s plan for us. They were part of His plan from the outset. “The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that even before the organization of this earth, covenants were made in heaven.”<sup>13</sup> In light of that long history, one might suppose that we will continue to make covenants in our next sphere of existence.

Given the centrality of covenants in God’s plan, and with the vivid image fresh in our minds of the commitment to covenants demonstrated by the people of Ammon, I would like to address three simple questions:

1. What exactly are covenants?
2. How does covenant keeping make the powers of God more available to us?
3. What can we do to increase our desire and ability to make and keep covenants in trying times?

These are basic questions. You may not learn or hear anything new from me, but I hope that you think about these questions in a different way.

### **What Are Covenants?**

First, what are covenants? Well, I am a lawyer, so I will start with a legal definition. According to *Black’s Law Dictionary*, the legal definition of a covenant is “an agreement . . . or promise of two or more parties . . . by which either of the parties pledges himself to the other that something is either done or shall be done.”<sup>14</sup> Wordy, I know—but that is what legal definitions are like. Put a bit more simply, in the legal world a covenant is a mutual promise parties make to each other to do or refrain from doing something. It is a contract.

In one respect this definition describes a covenant in the gospel sense as well. Gospel covenants are mutual promises made between God and His children. In fact, Doctrine and Covenants 66:2 tells us that “the fulness of [the] gospel” is God’s “everlasting covenant” with His children. As with legal covenants, this everlasting covenant consists of mutual promises. In the most general terms, God’s promise is that He will give us all that He has: eternal life. Our promise, on which His is dependent, is that we will obey His commandments.

But there is one key difference between a covenant of law and a gospel covenant. In the legal world, covenants are usually the result of protracted negotiations—a matter of give-and-take hammered out over time in a series of meetings. By contrast, as the Bible Dictionary notes, when a covenant is made between God and His children, “the two parties to the agreement do not stand in the relation of independent and equal contractors. God . . . fixes the terms, which man accepts.”<sup>15</sup>

At first glance this difference would seem to turn the everlasting covenant between God and His children into what the law calls an adhesion contract—a take it or leave it offer imposed by a stronger party on a weaker party who has no realistic choice but to accept the unfair terms of the offer. In the legal world, adhesion contracts are often considered unconscionable, and therefore unenforceable, because they can be used to impose harsh conditions on people who, in the absence of coercion, would never agree to such unfair terms. Some—and I confess to such feelings as a teenager from time to time—may view gospel covenants, and especially the commandments that are part of the everlasting covenant, as the harsh terms of a dictatorial parent imposed on His children merely as an arbitrary use of excessive power.

As with most things, however, the worldly view of the matter is inadequate to describe the things of God. God does not impose His covenants on any of His children. In fact, they are effective only if we accept them of our own free will and choice.

The fact that God determines the terms of the everlasting covenant without negotiating them with us is not an indication that He is trying to extract unfair promises from us. It is instead a reflection of two other more important differences between most legal covenants and contracts and gospel covenants.

One difference is that, unlike most people who enter into legal contracts, God does not enter into covenants to gain something from the other party. Think about it: He already has eternal life. He already has all power, all knowledge, and all joy. The fact that He does not negotiate the terms of His covenants with us is not an indication that He wants to impose His will on us; instead it is a reminder of the reality that we really have nothing to give to Him because He already has it all. As King Benjamin reminded his people: if we would serve God with all our souls all our lives, we would still “be unprofitable servants.”<sup>16</sup>

The gospel covenants may indeed be one-sided, but if so, it is God—and not us—who gets the short end of the bargain. God enters into everlasting covenants solely for our benefit—to help us lead the kind of life He leads, experience the kind of joy He experiences, and be the kind of being He is. The commandments He gives us are not negotiable because they are eternal laws

that, as He has learned, must be obeyed if one is to experience true freedom, true joy, and true fulfillment.

This insight leads to the second key difference between a legal covenant or contract and a gospel covenant. Because parties who enter into legal contracts are generally motivated by self-interest, many contracting parties conclude that once it is clear that they have struck a bad bargain, the rational thing to do is breach the agreement, pay the damages to the other side, and walk away in search of a new and better bargain. And, in fact, in most situations, if the breaching parties are willing to make the other party whole (by paying damages), the law generally allows them to end the contract.<sup>17</sup> Thus legal contracts are by nature temporary and somewhat insecure.

By contrast, the covenants that God offers us are everlasting. As the Church handbook states, “A covenant is a sacred and *enduring* promise between God and His children.”<sup>18</sup> Thus there is a level of commitment that God offers us that no earthly contracting party can offer. There is also a level of commitment He expects from us that is higher than earthly contract law demands.

In John 10:11–14 the Savior taught the difference between what Elder Bruce C. Hafen called the “contractual attitude”<sup>19</sup> of the world and the covenant attitude of the Lord when He described the difference between the hireling and the good shepherd. As Elder Hafen noted, the hireling “performs his conditional promise of care only when he receives something in return.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, “when the hireling ‘seeth the wolf coming,’ he ‘leaveth the sheep, and fleeth . . . because he . . . careth not for the sheep.’”<sup>21</sup> The hireling has entered into a legal contract, not a gospel covenant. Motivated as he is by self-interest, when it is clear that what he is receiving in wages is not worth what he is being asked to do (which is to guard the sheep at the peril of his life), he calls the contract off. And under the earthly law, that is his right—as long as he is willing to pay the owner for the lost sheep.

By contrast, the Savior said, “I am the good shepherd” and “the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.”<sup>22</sup> We can be sure that God will not walk away from His promises to us merely because He may have found a better bargain or have determined that circumstances have changed or that we are not worth the hassle. Unlike earthly legal promises, His covenant promises are eternal and enduring, operable “at all times and in all things, and in all places.”<sup>23</sup>

In fact, to give us even greater assurance that His covenant promises are everlastingly secure, God often confirms those promises with an oath. For example, in Hebrews we read that “when God made promise to Abraham,” He desired “more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability” (the unchangeable nature) of His promises, so He “confirmed” those promises “by an oath.”<sup>24</sup> And “because he could swear by no greater” (because there is nothing more certain than His godly character), “he sware by himself, Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, God was so serious about keeping His commitment to Abraham that He put His godhood on the line as a guarantee that He would keep His end of the bargain. That is an extraordinary guarantee—one that far supersedes any warranty that could possibly be given by mortals<sup>26</sup> and one that is available to all who are willing to enter into covenants with God.<sup>27</sup>

Understanding that God’s covenants are selfless on His part and also eternal should motivate us to adhere to those covenants, even when it seemingly costs us a lot—and even when, as in the case of the people of Ammon, it costs us our all. As Elder Hafen explained, contracting parties each agree to give 50 percent; covenant parties each agree to give 100 percent.<sup>28</sup> But in God’s case, His 100 percent is infinitely larger than is ours. God has committed all that He has (including His Only Begotten Son) to enable Him to fulfill His end of the bargain. We should not then be surprised that He asks us to give all that we have (which is infinitely small in comparison) to make it work.

### **How Does Covenant Keeping Make the Powers of God More Available?**

How exactly does keeping covenants help us in our eternal progression? There are many answers to that question.<sup>29</sup> Let me mention two.

*A. Making and keeping eternal covenants with God gives us the opportunity to complete our faith through action.*

The *Lectures on Faith* make it clear that faith is “the principle of action.” Or, as Elder John A. Widtsoe put it: “Faith is a principle that demands action. . . . Otherwise it remains an idle belief, an abstract conviction, a theory.”<sup>30</sup> Our faith is incomplete unless it is accompanied by action.<sup>31</sup> By entering into a promise to do something to demonstrate our faith and then by following up on that promise, we *complete* our faith, thereby making it a live, operative power in our lives.

Indeed, I believe that when we enter into gospel covenants, when we sincerely and honestly pledge to God to do something that He asks us to do, we instantly receive an increased ability to accomplish that task because it is a result of the exercise of our faith for making that covenant. By agreeing to enter into a promise with the Lord, we manifest our faith in Him and our belief in His promises, and we thereby receive the power that always accompanies any exercise of faith in the Lord.<sup>32</sup>

It could not have been easy for the people of Ammon to decide to meet an armed force intent on their destruction by laying aside their weapons. Only great faith in God could have prompted such a decision. And surely that resolve must have been sorely tested as they watched, and in some cases directly experienced, the heavy sacrifice that faith-inspired decision required. But, just as surely, the fact that they had entered into a solemn covenant with God—and that they had in turn been promised by Him that if they kept His commandments they would in the long run be blessed eternally—increased their faith and gave them the strength to adhere to that faith-inspired covenant when the most trying moments arrived.

*B. Entering into and keeping gospel covenants causes us to focus on the future when the haunting memories of the past or the immediate challenges of the present threaten to overwhelm us.*

Covenants force us to look forward. That eternal, forward-looking perspective can give us strength to meet the trials we must all face in order to progress.

The decision of the people of Ammon to lay aside their swords was prompted in large part by the deep regret they felt for the “many sins”<sup>33</sup> that they had committed in the past. And these were not limited to minor mistakes. The list included the grievous sin of murder.<sup>34</sup> They were, by their

own account, “the most lost of all mankind.”<sup>35</sup> How easy it would have been for the people of Ammon to become mired in the debilitating but incorrect view that their sins were too serious to be overcome. How easy it is for us to be overwhelmed at times in our lives by the same satanic doctrine. In such moments covenants give us hope, just as they did to the people of Ammon, by focusing us not on our past but on our glorious future—and, more important, on He who makes that future possible. Covenants provide an immediate and ongoing reminder of our connection with the Savior, whose atoning sacrifice makes it possible for us to overcome all our past mistakes and gives us hope in all our futures.

Similarly, focusing on covenants can provide us with the eternal perspective we need when present difficulties seem unbearable. It was their firm belief that “if our brethren destroy us . . . , we shall go to our God and shall be saved”<sup>36</sup> that gave the people of Ammon the strength to faithfully meet the kind of challenge few of us will be required to face. Covenants shifted their focus from their immediate situation to the future happiness that was promised them if they kept their covenants. This in turn gave them the heavenly strength they needed to persevere.

Covenants thus enliven and strengthen our faith *and* give us the eternal perspective we need to overcome both our past and our present difficulties.

### **How Can We Increase Our Desire and Ability to Make and Keep Covenants?**

Now to the final question. How can we increase our ability to keep our covenants so that the powers of heaven might be more available to us? Again, there are numerous answers, but let me focus on just one.

One of the best ways we can strengthen our ability to keep the covenants we have made is to reflect on those covenants often enough to make them an active, ongoing part of our lives. In that regard we would do well to take greater advantage of the wonderful opportunity we have each Sunday to partake of the sacrament. I believe that many of us underestimate both the importance of that sacred ordinance and the power—immediate daily power—that can come from greater focus on it.

I believe it is possible that the very frequency of the ordinance can cause us to overlook its significance.<sup>37</sup> We may too often view the opportunity to partake of the sacrament as merely a chance to renew our baptismal covenant, to wipe the slate clean, and to start over again. Now let me emphasize that that renewal is a great blessing in and of itself, but if we stop there, we may miss the full significance and the full power of that ordinance.

Elder Neil L. Andersen has recently taught:

“Spirituality is not stagnant, and neither are covenants. Hopefully . . . all of us as members are moving along a progressive growth both in our spirituality and in our covenants. Covenants bring not only commitments, but they bring spiritual power. . . . The sacrament is a beautiful time to not just renew our baptismal covenants but to commit to Him to renew all our covenants . . . and to approach Him in a spiritual power that we did not have previously.”<sup>38</sup>

When we partake of the sacrament we can witness unto the Father<sup>39</sup> that we remember all the covenants we have made and that we are willing to enter into them again, including the covenant

that we will always remember His Son. And each week we receive His promise—as sure, as certain, as immutable a promise as there has ever existed—that we will always have His Spirit to be with us to guide us, to strengthen us, and to change our very natures. Proper attention to the purpose and power of the sacrament can greatly increase the heavenly power that comes from keeping all of our covenants.

If we come to more fully understand and abide by our covenants, it will greatly change our lives. Moreover, the positive effects will not end with us; others will be directly impacted as well.

Some years after the people of Ammon made the remarkable decision to bury their weapons of war and to rely on their unique covenant with the Lord as a means of encountering a threat to their mortal existence, they found themselves in a similar situation when the Lamanites came to attack not just them but also the Nephites who were protecting them. Out of love for the Nephites they gave some thought to taking up arms to help defend their protectors.<sup>40</sup> But after being reminded of the importance of keeping that solemn covenant, they “were compelled to behold their brethren wade through their afflictions”<sup>41</sup> without providing any direct military assistance—a sacrifice that must have been almost as difficult as what they had gone through years earlier.

However, recognizing that this particular covenant was unique to them, they realized that their own children—some of whom may not have been born at the time of the covenant and many of whom were now old enough to take up arms themselves—“had not entered into a covenant that they would not take their weapons of war to defend themselves.”<sup>42</sup> And so these young men went to war. We are all familiar with their story. We call them the sons of Helaman because they were led by that great Nephite leader. But I think we would do well to also remember that they were really the sons of the people of Ammon. If we do not, we may overlook the profound and enduring impact that their parents’ steadfast adherence to their unique covenant had on these young men.

In their first tour of military duty, these sons of the people of Ammon were in a situation in which they had to decide whether to fight or to flee. Helaman described their reaction and, more important, the source of their determination:

“Now they never had fought, yet they did not fear death; and they did think more upon the liberty of their fathers than they did upon their lives; yea, they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them.

“And they rehearsed unto me the words of their mothers, saying: We do not doubt our mothers knew it.”<sup>43</sup>

Note that the scriptures do not indicate that these young men had no doubts of their own about God and His commandments. The faith of some of these young men may well have not been fully developed at that point in their lives—though it soon would be. But the one thing they did not doubt was *that their mothers knew it*. And what their mothers knew and taught so powerfully to them was “that if they did not doubt, *God would deliver them*.”

Think about that teaching in that context: “God would deliver them” if they kept their covenant. The Book of Mormon does not tell us much about the fathers of those whom we call the sons of Helaman. I suspect that one reason for that is that at least some of those sons grew up in homes without fathers, in families led by single mothers who had seen their husbands killed because of their steadfast commitment to their covenant with God.

And it was those sweet, valiant women whose words and examples made it crystal clear to their sons that they knew “God would deliver” their sons if their sons would not doubt. Of all people, these mothers understood full well that the promise that God would deliver them did not mean that He would spare them from the immediate pains, afflictions, and disappointments of this life or even from the immediate effects of physical death itself. But they knew that in the most important, eternal sense—the only sense that in the long run really matters—God would surely deliver on His promise of exaltation if they simply did not doubt the power of that promise. And this truth was so deeply engrained in the words, actions, and beings of those steadfast women that their sons *could not* doubt that their mothers knew it. And because their mothers knew, they too believed and acted on that belief.

This kingdom—the kingdom of God—will be built up by covenant-keeping, multigenerational families. That is what heaven will look like and that is what heaven on earth can look like. Gospel covenants open up the powers of heaven. And covenants open up those powers both for those who make and keep those covenants *and for those whom they love*. Of all the powers of heaven that are made available to those who keep sacred covenants, perhaps none is of greater importance than the eternal impact covenant keeping will have on their children, their grandchildren, and multiple generations to come.

I testify that God lives and that as surely as He lives He will fulfill His promises to us. If we will but believe in Him and manifest that belief by adhering to the covenants He offers us, the very powers of heaven will gather to aid us and our loved ones in whatever challenges we face. I so testify in the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. Alma 24:4.
2. Alma 24:2, 5.
3. Alma 24:5.
4. Alma 24:6.
5. Alma 26:24.
6. Alma 24:18.
7. Alma 24:16.
8. Alma 24:16.
9. Alma 24:21.
10. See Alma 24:22.
11. Alma 24:25.
12. Alma 24:26.
13. Walter F. González, “Followers of Christ,” *Ensign*, May 2011; citing *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 42 (footnote 15). President Spencer W. Kimball observed: “We made vows, solemn vows, in the heavens before we came to this mortal life. . . .



We have made covenants. We made them before we accepted our position here on earth” (“Be Ye Therefore Perfect,” devotional address, Salt Lake Institute of Religion, University of Utah, 10 January 1975).

14. Online *Black’s Law Dictionary*, s.v. “covenant,” [thelawdictionary.org/covenant](http://thelawdictionary.org/covenant).

15. Bible Dictionary, s.v. “covenant,” 651.

16. Mosiah 2:21; see also verses 20–24.

17. In some limited situations, the law does require the breaching party to honor the promise made rather than merely paying damages. See online *Black’s Law Dictionary*, s.v. “specific performance,” [thelawdictionary.org/specific-performance](http://thelawdictionary.org/specific-performance).

18. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 2.1.3, “Covenants”; emphasis added.

19. See Bruce C. Hafen, “Covenant Marriage,” *Ensign*, November 1996.

20. Hafen, “Covenant Marriage.”

21. Hafen, “Covenant Marriage”; quoting John 10:12–13.

22. John 10:11.

23. Mosiah 18:9.

24. Hebrews 6:13, 17.

25. Hebrews 6:13–14; see also JST, Genesis 14:30: God swore “unto Enoch and unto his seed with an oath by himself.”

26. As the final verse of the hymn “How Firm a Foundation” makes clear, “The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose” has God’s promise that He “will not, [He] cannot, desert to his foes.” He promises “that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,” that He will “never, no never, no never forsake!” (*Hymns*, 2002, no. 85).

27. “God having sworn unto Enoch . . . with an oath by himself; that every one being ordained after this order and calling should have power, by faith” (JST, Genesis 14:30).

28. See Hafen, “Covenant Marriage.”

29. See D. Todd Christofferson, “The Power of Covenants,” *Ensign*, May 2009.

30. John A. Widtsoe, “What Is the Need of Ordinances,” in *Evidences and Reconciliation: Aids to Faith in a Modern Day* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943), 197.

31. “Faith without works” truly “is dead,” as James observed (James 2:20; see also James 2:17).

32. As an illustration, in Mosiah 18 we find the familiar verses that describe the terms of the baptismal covenant—the things we promise to do when we enter into that covenant with God. Note, however, that even before they entered into the baptismal covenant, the people of Alma were already “desirous to come into the fold of God” (verse 8). They were already “willing to bear one another’s burdens, . . . to mourn with those that mourn,” and to “comfort those that [stood] in need of comfort” (verses 8–9). Alma asked them to enter into the baptismal covenant because this was already “the desire of [their] hearts” (verse 10). What they were doing was putting into action the faith that they had already developed in their hearts. And in return for their willingness to act on that faith by entering into that covenant through baptism, God promised that He would help them act on this desire by “pour[ing] out his Spirit more abundantly upon [them]” (verse 10).

33. Alma 24:10.

34. See Alma 24:10–11.

35. Alma 24:11.

36. Alma 24:16.

37. See Jeffrey R. Holland, “Prepare to Have a Spiritual Experience When Partaking of the Sacrament,” in *Excerpts from General Conference Leadership Training, April 2015*; video available from stake presidents.

38. Neil L. Andersen, “Witnessing to Live the Commandments,” in *Excerpts*.

39. See D&C 20:77, 79; see also 3 Nephi 18:10–11. As Elder Robert D. Hales recently observed: “I sometimes wonder if we realize in this covenant that we’re taking that we are witnessing to the Father, . . . bearing testimony to the Father” (“Always Remember Him,” in *Excerpts*).

40. See Alma 53:13.

41. Alma 53:15; see also verse 14.

42. Alma 53:16.

43. Alma 56:47–48.