

## Becoming Zion

I have a garden bed on the side of my house that is opposite my driveway. It is the side of the house that no one but me sees. And I only happen to see it, because I am the one who mows the lawn at our house, and there happens to be a small strip of lawn right next to it. Since this particular bed is in such an obscure place where it is never seen by others, I have done very little with it since we moved into the home, just over a year ago.

But last autumn I did prune the three perennial bushes that are in that bed, and I noticed this spring that those bushes were having a difficult time establishing any new growth. I kept my eye on them each week as I mowed, and I feared for some time that I had lost them completely. It was long after all my other perennials were taking shape and growing in nicely that I finally saw new growth coming in around the outside of these particular plants. But the entire center of the bush remained dead and remains dead still.

There isn't anything else planted in that garden, as I simply have not had time to worry about it. So the remainder of the ground proved to be a fertile place for weeds to start growing. For some weeks I had watched a rather invasive weed take hold in that empty space—it was the kind that spreads quickly, like a ground cover, and is difficult to remove because it attaches to the ground in so many places. The interesting thing about this weed is that it starts out looking quite beautiful and like it would be a nice addition to the garden bed, but it grew so quickly that I noticed that the weed had completely overtaken the smallest bush, and that it was threatening to overtake the other two plants that had finally started to take hold and grow. It was time to act.

As I started to pull the weed up I noticed something hitting my arms. It felt like sand, and at first I wondered if there was sand mixed into the dirt. It took me a few moments to realize that by pulling up the weed, it was throwing little seeds all over the place, hitting my arms and landing in the soil. No matter how carefully I pulled up the weed, it

released seeds into the surrounding area, making sure it would continue to propagate. I sat and pondered upon how to kill the weed: if I pulled it up, even more weeds would grow back in its place; and if I sprayed poison on it, the poison would likely kill the bushes as well, since they were in such close proximity to each other, and they shared the same earth for their roots. How could I get rid of this weed? I decided that ultimately, the only way to save the plant AND completely destroy the weed, while leaving the area still plantable, was by removing the plant to a new location and then destroying the weed by fire. Well, seeing as how this is not a realistic way to pursue gardening—you can't just go burning every garden bed that has weeds in it—I instead chose to just pull out the weeds each time they grow back.

I would like to liken this story about the weed to the creation of Zion. On the one hand, we have a bush that had blossomed and been beautiful in a past season, then it almost died, before it eventually found new life. It represents the Lord's people on the earth, a covenant people. The weed, on the other hand, blew in on the wind and found the fertile ground; it looked beautiful and took hold rapidly, seeking to become bigger and better and threatened to overtake the bush. Every time it is discovered and pulled out, it seeks to propagate itself by sowing seeds which enable its continued growth, a growth whose purpose is to overtake the entire garden. This weed is Satan, and its seeds are the words we hurl at each other, our accusations and our desires to “be right.” In the Answer and Covenant, the Lord tells us, “In the work you have performed there are those who have been Satan, accusing one another, wounding hearts and causing jarring, contention, and strife by their accusations. Rather than loving one another, even among you who desire a good thing, some have dealt unkindly as if they were the opponents, accusers and adversaries. In this they were wrong. You have sought to recover the scriptures because you hope to obtain the covenant for my protective hand to be over you, but you cannot be Satan and be mine. If you take upon you my covenant, you must abide it as a people to gain what I promise. You think Satan will be bound a thousand years, and it will be

so, but do not understand your own duty to bind that spirit within you so that you give no heed to accuse others. It is not enough to say you love God; you must also love your fellow man. Nor is it enough to say you love your fellow man while you, as Satan, divide, contend and dispute against any person who labors on an errand seeking to do my will....You have become your own adversaries, and you cannot be Satan and also be mine. ” Humbling words, indeed. I think all of us can probably identify with both the bush and the weed. We want to be the bush, but all too often we find ourselves being the weed. The question then becomes: when the fire comes, which one will you be? I want to be part of that Zion plant.

How do we establish Zion? How do we grow into the beautiful plant that God wants His people to be? Success will never be defined as “getting a movement going.” We have that NOW. All we can claim right now is that we found a beautiful piece of dirt to plant ourselves in; we can't claim any kind of success. Success will only occur when we have a New Jerusalem, a *Zion people*, and God returning to the earth to reside with us. But in order for us to get THAT, we have to lay aside our disputations, our accusations, and our desires to “be right.” We must have some small number of people who can let go of their pride, ambition, jealousies, and contention and simply love each other. That is where it begins.

The latter-day Zion is the culmination of the Lord's work. It is the *unity* of God's children. God wants a *family* that He can come reside with. Zion must necessarily be a *people*. We are familiar with the scriptures concerning the latter-day Zion.

Isaiah prophesied, “And I have put my words in thy mouth, and I have covered thee in the shadow of mine hand, that I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations of the earth, and say unto Zion, *Thou art my people* (emphasis added)” (Isaiah 51:16, 2 Nephi 8:16).

Jesus Himself told us in Bountiful, “...verily I say unto you, I give unto you a sign, that ye may know the time when these things shall be about to take place—that I shall gather in, from their long dispersion, *my people*, O house of Israel, and shall establish again among them my Zion... (emphasis added)” ( 3 Nephi 21:1).

Zion cannot be Zion without a *people*. Jacob likewise stated in 2<sup>nd</sup> Nephi, “Wherefore, they that fight against Zion and *the covenant people of the Lord* shall lick up the dust of their feet; and the *people* of the Lord shall not be ashamed. For the *people* of the Lord are they who wait for him; for they still wait for the coming of the Messiah (emphasis added)” (2 Nephi 6:13).

I would like to talk for a minute about that last statement from Jacob—“...for they still wait for the coming of the Messiah.” While that statement could be interpreted to mean that they, as a group living in Zion, are still waiting for the Lord to come reside with them—to “move in” with them—I think it could also mean that there are those in Zion who have not yet had their own personal, tangible experience with Jesus Christ. They are still “waiting on the Lord.” I think this teaches us a couple very important things. The first is that there are TWO covenants we are seeking to become part of: the personal covenant with Jesus Christ AND the Zion covenant to become His people. The second thing we learn is that there may be a space, or a time, between the Zion covenant and the personal covenant, for those who have not yet received it. We know there are those who have already received a personal covenant with the Lord before they will receive the Zion covenant. But perhaps there are many who will receive the Zion covenant—hopefully tomorrow—that will still have to wait yet some time before they receive the personal covenant—perhaps they will have to wait until the Lord accepts Zion and returns to it in His glory. Perhaps it will not be until then that they will receive that personal visit with the Lord. I would suggest that the timing for these things is very

personal and very specific to each individual. I don't know that one necessarily has to happen before the other; but I am beginning to understand that they *both must happen*. This brings me to a scripture that I have never understood until recently. In the Doctrine and Covenants we learn this about the Telestial kingdom: “For these are they who are of Paul, and of Apollos, and of Cephas. These are they who say they are some of one and some of another—some of Christ and some of John and...” so on and so forth (D&C 76:99-100). These are they who inherit the *Telestial* glory—those who say they **are of Christ**. Okaaaaayyy...what??? Isn't this what we are all trying to achieve?? To become “of Christ?” How does being “of Christ” make you unworthy of exaltation? It's because being “of Christ” is only half the ticket for us. The other half is becoming “His people.” You can't just say, “It's just me and Jesus! I got me my bag o' Jesus, and He told me...!” Zion is not about “Jesus and me.” Remember: **TWO** covenants. You can't stop at the first one. That is isolation, and isolation can't build Zion. Isolation can't build a temple. Isolation doesn't teach us how to be of one heart and one mind. What you get with “Jesus and me” is a whole lot of you and you and you and you—individuals walking around who never really interact. But what God wants is **YOU**—as a whole, as a group, as a people—His people. Eastern religions have been great about teaching us how to commune with God, how to achieve “Jesus and me.” But then they stop there, with you alone, on a mountaintop, in prayer pose. I'm not mocking meditation—I do it a lot. But the problem is that you CAN'T stop there. You have to move forward and receive the Zion covenant, as well. And then you actually have to *become* Zion. Believe me, there have been days (MANY of them, recently) when I have wanted to sell everything I own and take my little 5<sup>th</sup> wheel trailer deep into the mountains where I don't have to work things out with you people anymore. There are days I wish this could just be about Jesus and me. But it's not.

The pattern we see in scripture is that as soon as someone achieves blessings from the Lord, they have a desire to bring their *people* with them.

One example was Enos, who wrote: “And my soul hungered; and I kneeled down before my Maker, and I cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication for mine own soul; and all the day long did I cry unto him; yea, and when the night came I did still raise my voice high that it reached the heavens. And there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed. And I, Enos, knew that God could not lie; wherefore, my guilt was swept away....And it came to pass that when I had heard these words I began to feel a desire for the welfare of my brethren, the Nephites; wherefore, I did pour out my whole soul unto God for them” (Enos 1).

And we are all familiar with Alma the Younger's conversion and redemption story: “And it came to pass that after they had fasted and prayed for the space of two days and two nights, the limbs of Alma received their strength, and he stood up and began to speak unto them, bidding them to be of good comfort; For, said he, I have repented of my sins, and have been redeemed of the Lord; behold I am born of the Spirit....My soul hath been redeemed from the gall of bitterness and bonds of iniquity. I was in the darkest abyss; but now I behold the marvelous light of God....And now it came to pass that Alma began from this time forward to teach the people, and those who were with Alma at the time the angel appeared unto them, traveling round about through all the land, publishing to all the people the things which they had heard and seen, and preaching the word of God...” (Mosiah 27:23-32).

When you have an experience with the Lord, the way you know that it is indeed the Lord speaking to you is that it necessarily places a desire within you to have your family and friends have the same experience! It does not bring a desire for isolation or a spirit of pride with it. It brings meekness and humility and love for those around you. When the Lord offers forgiveness to YOU, you WANT to offer forgiveness to those around you. If that experience makes you say, “I saw Jesus, so I'm better than you...” then

you're NOT being like Jesus. You're no longer on the line—or below the line—as we were just taught. If you have an experience that teaches you something that will benefit the group, don't step above the line. Lower yourself; serve; raise the whole line—but don't step above it. How do you bear Christ's countenance if you are unwilling to kneel and serve and wash the feet of others?

“And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). We are about to covenant, not just to *say* but, to *do* this—to be of one heart and one mind. I am sure that I am not the only one who is feeling the weight of my fallen nature today, as I prepare to receive a covenant from the Lord tomorrow. I am sorrowful because of my pride and my stubbornness. I don't anticipate that God expects that tomorrow we will all of a sudden become of one heart and mind—that's just not realistic. But I do believe He expects us to notice our short-comings and *correct* them. I have two young-adult children who are making their way into adulthood, and they are both making all kinds of mistakes. I don't care about the mistakes; I just want them to *learn* from the mistakes and *correct* their behavior. I believe the Lord is giving us some time to figure this out, but as Denver said in St. George, the clock is ticking. We have limited time. We have grown up in a culture that has clearly defined what “sin” is as a quick list of do's and don'ts—while telling us all the while that it is good for us to be stepping on top of each other to achieve success; that words don't hurt or matter, and you should just not care what anyone else thinks; and that you'd better maintain control over everything around you, because as soon as you lose control, everything falls apart. We have so much unbelief about what is offensive to God, but I believe it all boils down to how we treat each other. The answer is simple—it's not *easy*, but it is simple:

It all comes down to forgiveness and love. Forgiveness is about our *past*. A friend of mine recently posted this on Instagram, and I thought it was so perfect: Forgiveness is

letting go of a hope for a better past. Let me repeat that: Forgiveness is letting go of a hope for a better past. We can't change our past. Why are we holding onto it? Maybe this is why it is so easy for Jesus to forgive—because all things are before him, past, present, and future. He's not hoping for a better past—it's all right now! We need to learn how to emulate this virtue of forgiveness. And we need to love. Love is about our present and our future. There is no more powerful force in the universe than love. We just have to figure out how to tap into it.

If the purpose of the Zion covenant is to allow the Lord to work with our hearts and minds to bring love and forgiveness, is it just possible that the way we achieve a *personal* covenant with the Lord is *through* the Zion covenant?? What if the way we come into the Lord's presence is not at all by pleading for our *own* salvation, but by pleading for the salvation of those around us?? What if God's purpose is to make us Zion, *so that* He can save us each individually?

May we each turn our hearts to the Lord, in meekness and in submission to His will. May we learn to love like He loves and forgive like He forgives. May we become *His* people.

“And the Lord said unto Enoch: As I live, even so will I come in the last days, in the days of wickedness and vengeance, to fulfil the oath which I have made unto you concerning the children of Noah; And the day shall come that the earth shall rest, but before that day the heavens shall be darkened, and a veil of darkness shall cover the earth; and the heavens shall shake, and also the earth; and great tribulations shall be among the children of men, but my people will I preserve; And righteousness will I send down out of heaven; and truth will I send forth out of the earth, to bear testimony of mine Only Begotten; his resurrection from the dead; yea, and also the resurrection of all men; and righteousness and truth will I cause to sweep the earth as with a flood, to gather out mine elect from the four quarters of the earth, unto a place which I shall

prepare, an Holy City, that my people may gird up their loins, and be looking forth for the time of my coming; for there shall be my tabernacle, and it shall be called Zion, a New Jerusalem. And the Lord said unto Enoch: Then shalt thou and all thy city meet them there, and we will receive them into our bosom, and they shall see us; and we will fall upon their necks, and they shall fall upon our necks, and we will kiss each other; And there shall be mine abode, and it shall be Zion...” (Moses 7:60-64).

Praise be to Son Ahman, Amen.