

*“My Soul Delighteth
in the Things of the Lord”
(2 Nephi 4:16)*

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My soul delighteth in the things of the Lord,” wrote Nephi, “and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard” (2 Nephi 4:16). Yet in the verses that follow, he expressed sorrow and even grief because of his weaknesses. Sometimes known as Nephi’s Psalm, these twenty powerful verses in 2 Nephi chapter 4 give us unique insights into the process he went through to lift himself out of discouragement and to renew his faith and determination in the Lord. I would like to spend the next few minutes examining these verses. My hope is that, by looking carefully at Nephi’s approach, we might find a pattern that would assist us as we struggle through challenges in our own lives.

As already noted, Nephi expressed his delight for the things of the Lord and his desire to continually ponder the blessings and guidance he received. His words indicate he truly learned to serve the Lord with all his heart and mind. The constancy of his mind and heart reminds us of the Psalmist, who said: “I will bless the Lord at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth” (Psalms 34:1).

Nonetheless, despite Nephi’s righteous desires and his attempt to continually feed his mind with the things of God, there were challenges in his life. In verses 17–19 Nephi described the affliction he felt because of the weaknesses of his flesh and the sorrow and grief caused by his iniquity. He wrote:

I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.

And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins. [2 Nephi 4:18–19]

Nephi was puzzled by his sorrows. He had seen marvelous visions in which he was taught about the Apostasy and Restoration, the coming of the Savior to his descendants, the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 11–14), the scattering and gathering of Israel, and more. He had been taught the mysteries of God (see 1 Nephi 10:17–19). Angels had ministered to

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him and, he had beheld things he could not write because they were “too great for man” (2 Nephi 4:24–25). And yet, despite these tremendous experiences, he was troubled by temptation and affliction.

Surely all of us, in one way or another, can relate to Nephi’s feeling of being “encompassed about” by sin. Our world is becoming darker and darker, and we can, at times, feel beset, either through the wickedness of the world and its accompanying lack of hope or through our own weaknesses or afflictions. Satan desires to surround us. He attacks us from all sides. If we are not careful, he will hem us in (see *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. “beset”), bind us down, chain us, and lead us carefully away to hell (see 2 Nephi 9:45, 28:21–22).

In the last phrase of verse 19, we notice a significant turn in Nephi’s expression of sorrow: “Nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted.” He then recalled the marvelous support and blessings he had received from the Lord: “My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions[,] . . . preserved me[,] . . . filled me with his love, . . . confounded mine enemies, . . . heard my cry . . . , and . . . given me knowledge. . . . Mine eyes have beheld great things” (2 Nephi 4:20–23, 25).

In this passage we recognize that Nephi kept his covenant with the Savior, remembering all that the Lord had done to guide and bless him. It is also an example of the fulfillment of one of the major purposes of the Book of Mormon: “to show . . . the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers” (title page).

Nephi, more than most of us, understood what it means to be “tempest-tossed” on “life’s billows,” “discouraged, thinking all is lost.” He followed, as should we, the advice of the hymn:

Count your many blessings; name them one by one,

And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.
[“Count Your Blessings,” *Hymns*, no. 241]

We can look at these words as either a quaint nineteenth-century formula or as an invitation to keep our covenant to always remember the Savior and his role in our lives, even amid our persisting trials and troubles.

So now, after having recalled the many ways the Lord had blessed him, Nephi found himself at a point where he had to choose. He was at the intersection between faith and discouragement, and his agency had to be used. In order to make his decision about whether to continue on the path of sorrow and grief or to turn fully to the Lord, he asked these important questions:

Why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken, because of mine afflictions?

And why should I yield to sin, because of my flesh? Yea, why should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul? Why am I angry because of mine enemy? [2 Nephi 4:26–27]

This may be the most important part of the chapter, because it helps us to see how Nephi used his agency to overcome the grief he felt in his heart. He expressed his sorrows, remembered the strength of the Lord in his life, and questioned why he would want to stay in that zone of sin and discouragement and trouble. We can certainly do the same in our hour of need. Why would we want to linger in valleys of sorrow, waste away, or slacken our strength? Knowing what we know about sin, what in the world would cause us to give way, give in, or give up? When we know our actions, thoughts, or circumstances will allow the evil one to destroy our peace or cause us anger, should we

not do all we can to get up and get going, to move our position and set a new course?

There is no question about the course Nephi charted. He chose, through his faith, to lift himself toward the things of righteousness. “Awake, my soul!” he exclaimed. “No longer droop in sin. Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul” (2 Nephi 4:28).

The lesson is clear: When encompassed about and discouraged, when we feel all is lost, we need to close up the spaces in our hearts and minds that give entrance to the enemy and follow Alma’s counsel to “give place” for the seed of faith to be planted in our hearts (Alma 32:28). As we clear space and make room for the word of God, for the Spirit of the Lord, for all that is true and good, our righteous desires will increase, allowing the Lord’s promise to be manifest: “Even as you desire of me so it shall be unto you” (D&C 6:8).

How can we increase such desires in us? To emphasize a request, sometimes we place a verb at the beginning of a sentence, using an imperative statement. Those of you who are mothers may have employed this approach in speaking to your children: “Take the garbage out now, son!” “Get your homework done!” Notice the imperative statements Nephi used in verses 28–30 when he addressed himself as a way to increase his determination and focus his spiritual energies:

Awake, my soul!

Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul.

Do not anger.

Do not slacken my strength.

Rejoice, O my heart. [See 2 Nephi 4:28–30.]

At times when our faith is slipping, we are tired, or we need to summon strength, we might speak to ourselves in the same way: “Have faith. Be calm. Don’t be angry. Fear not. Trust the Lord. Don’t give up!”

It is particularly interesting that Nephi repeated the phrase *rejoice, O my heart*. Just a few verses before, he had written that he desired to rejoice but could not. “Nevertheless,” he confirmed, “I know in whom I have trusted” (2 Nephi 4:19).

If we desire to rejoice but cannot, then like Nephi, we ought to place our trust in the Lord, remember that his help will come, and let our hearts believe in his mercy and grace. We are told in the Doctrine and Covenants to lift up our hearts and rejoice (see D&C 25:13, 27:15, 31:3, 42:69). Our heart is the repository of our deepest feelings and beliefs and the seat of our intellect (see *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th. ed., s.v. “heart”). Lifting up our hearts means elevating our thoughts and feelings and refocusing our desires. It means putting into practice the command to “let virtue garnish [our] thoughts unceasingly” (D&C 121:45). How important is each of the dimensions of the commandment to love God with all our heart, might, mind and strength! (See D&C 59:5.) Loving and trusting God in our hearts and minds may require all of our might and strength, but doing so will allow us, in time, to rejoice.

Nephi did not merely convince himself to lift up his heart and get out of the doldrums. This was not simply the power of positive thinking at work. His words to himself—“Awake my soul! No longer droop in sin” (2 Nephi 4:28)—were determined, focused expressions that indicated his orientation and his intent to serve the Lord. He steered his soul toward salvation and invited the Lord to place him “beyond the power of all his enemies,” which is how Joseph Smith described salvation (HC 5:392).

Not only did Nephi address himself and gather internal strength, he also cried unto the Lord—prayed—asking God for strength.

Let’s examine his prayer. It began with a commitment: “O Lord, I will praise thee forever; yea, my soul will rejoice in thee, my

God, and the rock of my salvation” (2 Nephi 4:30).

Next, he offers a plea for deliverance and help to avoid sin: “O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul? Wilt thou deliver me out of the hands of mine enemies? Wilt thou make me that I may shake at the appearance of sin?” (2 Nephi 4:31). Nephi’s petition reminds us of the Lord’s Prayer: “Suffer us not to be led into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:13, JST).

Then Nephi introduced three vivid metaphors. First, a gate:

May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite! O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me. [2 Nephi 4:32]

Second, a path, or way:

That I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road!

. . . O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine enemies! Wilt thou make my path straight before me! Wilt thou not place a stumbling block in my way—but that thou wouldst clear my way before me, and hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine enemy. [2 Nephi 4:32–33]

And finally, a robe:

Wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness? [2 Nephi 4:33]

What powerful language is found in this prayer! Encircled around with robes of protective righteousness, we too can make our way forward on the straight path, praying the Lord will clear it and open his gates before us.

The conclusion of this chapter and of Nephi’s prayer returns us to the theme of trust, with a commitment to continue to pray forever:

O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of

flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust . . . in man or maketh flesh his arm.

Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh. Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss; therefore I will lift up my voice unto thee; . . . Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up unto thee, my rock and mine everlasting God. Amen. [2 Nephi 4:34–35]

Clearly, Nephi had now come to a point of increased strength and determination. Following his teaching to “liken all scriptures unto [ourselves] . . . for our profit and learning” (1 Nephi 19:23), I believe his experience provides a model, a pattern we can apply when we are discouraged or feel affliction or grief. If the enemy has us encompassed and we want to rejoice but cannot, we can

1. express delight in the things of the Lord and continually ponder our blessings,
2. recount how he has helped us in the past,
3. ask ourselves if we really want to linger in sorrow or despair,
4. direct and command our will and thoughts toward the Lord,
5. ask the Lord to clear the way before us, protect us, and deliver us from our enemies,
6. commit to him that we will trust him and raise our voices to him forever.

This chapter provides us great insight into the process of building our character and strengthening our faith. In it we can see the fulfillment of the Lord’s promise that as we come unto the Savior, his ever-sufficient grace will transform our weaknesses into strengths (see Ether 12:27).

We can apply Nephi’s pattern of reflection, leading us to determination, which then leads to affirmation and confirmation, promising God we will forever trust and praise him. Nephi, at great sacrifice, bent his will to align it with the will of the Lord. Should we not do the same? His constancy of mind and heart,

his continual desire to focus and orient his life on the things of God, these are Christlike attributes that must become part of our character, keeping us straight in the plain road that leads—even ascends—home to God.

Regarding that great journey, Elder Neal A. Maxwell has observed:

The costs of discipleship are not paid just once . . . at the front end and then all is done. The dues for discipleship continue . . . on an ascending scale. . . . There are ever so many reminders of the straight and narrow way that leads on and on after the entering of the first gate.

Of course, there is another gate—the final gate to Home. . . . We are at best barely in the suburbs, and we still have miles to go. [Wherefore Ye Must Press Forward, (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book, 1977), 32–33]

During the remainder of that journey we “will live in [a] wheat-and-tares situation” (Neal A. Maxwell, “Becometh As a Child,” *Ensign*, May 1996, 68), causing many to despair. How must we live so as to identify and appreciate the things of the Lord, avoiding the things of the world that would rob us of our identity as a peculiar people? Paul’s counsel to Titus seems particularly appropriate:

Denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world;

Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;

Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. [Titus 2:12–14]

Nephi’s own counsel about traveling this path of life is also powerful: “Press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men” (2 Nephi 31:20).

As one former church leader suggested, foster

within the fountains of your feelings” the spirit of truth; let “the work of improvement and reform . . . extend through the entire circle of your being, let it reach every relationship in life, and every avocation and duty embraced within your existence.

Let it affect your thinking, and the feelings which you cultivate, and let there be nothing pertaining to your being but what shall be influenced by it. [Amasa Lyman, in JD 3:177; 176]

When we do so, we can experience what Brigham Young called “a continual feast to the soul,” given to those who “in the reflections and meditations of the mind” contemplate “the things of God and the rich treasures of infinite wisdom, which are opened to the children of men who obey the Gospel. . . . They grow in grace, and in the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus Christ, until they see as they are seen, and know as they are known” (JD 1:234, 241).

How is it that we ever lose the Spirit? President John Taylor indicated:

We forget to pray and call upon God, and dedicate ourselves to him, or because we fall into transgression, commit iniquity, and lose the Spirit of God, and forget our calling’s glorious hope; but if we could all the time see and realize and understand our true position before God, our minds would be continually on the stretch after the things of God, and we should be seeking to know all the day long, what we could do to promote the happiness and salvation of the world . . . that when we stand before him, he may say to us, “well done thou good and faithful servant.” [In Teachings of Presidents of the Church: John Taylor (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 103–4]

This “[stretching] after the things of God,” elevating our thoughts and dedicating ourselves to him, will help us out of our

own valleys of sorrow. Next time you are discouraged, feeling all is lost, follow the pattern Nephi gave us. Recall your blessings. Focus your desires. Commit yourself to the Lord and ask him to clear the way before you. Pray to be encircled in the robe of his righteousness, and commit to continually lift up your voice to him.

Enduring on the straight path will bring us to a point where, one day, we, with a great multitude from all nations, will receive our own robes and palms in our hands (see Revelation 7:9). The question will be asked: “What are these which are arrayed in white

robes? and whence came they?” And the answer will follow: “These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:13, 14).

Then, dear sisters, along with Isaiah, we will loudly proclaim:

Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation.

Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation. [Isaiah 12:2–3]