

# Zoram and I: Getting Our Stories Straight

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Imagine a scene early in the Book of Mormon: Zoram is minding his own business in Laban's household one night, perhaps securing the records or telling stories with other servants. His master is out. Then he hears a voice calling, "Zoram, I need to take the plates to some elder brethren. I want you to follow me." He gets the plates and follows. He recognizes Laban's clothes. When Zoram arrives outside the city walls, he sees two other men, but they're young, not old. He senses something isn't as it should be. Suddenly, the man he's been following turns, grabs him forcefully, and says: "Hold still. If you do what I say, we'll spare your life. I swear that if you follow us you will have a place with us and be a free man like us. You need to understand that what we're doing has been commanded by God."

Zoram has to make a quick decision. To save himself from harm, he agrees. Not only that, he "did take courage" from Nephi's words. Zoram promised "he would go down into the wilderness" and "made an oath unto us that he would tarry with us from that time forth." After this oath, Nephi says, "Our fears did cease concerning him" (1 Nephi 4:35, 37).

Remember that at this point Nephi can't tell Zoram where they are going for one simple reason: he doesn't know.

Will Zoram understand that he is the beneficiary of an extraordinary opportunity? Will he believe and be free even though he is being constrained to do so? Will he stay true to his oath, even though it was made under duress? Or will he bristle at being physically assaulted and forced to make a decision in unfair circumstances? Imagine the stories Zoram could tell his children and that later generations could tell each other.

Zoram could say:

*At first I thought I was caught in a trap, but in the longer view, my presence was planned and prepared for. When Ishmael and his family arrived, I was the extra male needed to marry a daughter of Ishmael. Out of all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, I was given a chance to live with a prophet's family, marry as an equal, and inherit the promised land along with them and on equal terms, even though my status in Jerusalem society would probably never have afforded me the opportunity to associate with them. I witnessed miracles as God brought us from Jerusalem to a promised land. More to the*

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*point, I learned about the true God and my place before Him. We have been extraordinarily blessed. What I could see as a problem was actually the circumstance the Lord used to bless me and my posterity.*

Or he could tell himself and his children:

*I went along because I had to, but the truth is they kidnapped me and hijacked my life. I had to leave behind a good job and my beloved family. I was in line to move up socially and even become a scribe. I never saw my mother again. I was forced to make a promise against my will, and I'll never know what I gave up. Not only that, my trust was abused. Nephi led me away knowing that I thought he was Laban. Because he led me on in error, he was a liar, and that's not what prophets do. I have no further obligation to him or his offspring. He said we would be free like them, but I've always felt different.*

As strange as it may seem, I assert that Zoram's story is like all of ours. He could see God's providence or man's manipulation. In conditions not of his choosing, he had to decide how to view himself and whether to nurse a justifiable grievance. He had to choose among the competing truths by which he could interpret his life. He had to decide whether to exercise faith and, in so doing, see his difficult, even unfair, circumstances as the very means by which God would bless him if he acted right. He had to decide whether to obey a commandment of God that at the time could be read as inappropriate and even unbelievable. His choice would influence his posterity far into the future. And he had to do all this without fully understanding the situation. That's life.

I'm going to use Zoram as a launching pad to talk about the personal narratives we tell ourselves as we live our lives. These narratives have a powerful effect on us and, most likely, on others around us, including our own children. I will also talk of the narrative that God

keeps wanting to tell us about who we are and what He wants us to be. But first a disclaimer: Personal narrative is not a gospel principle. You won't find it in the Topical Guide. But our stories are a real part of our lives, and they influence how we see ourselves in relation to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. If you don't believe this, just ask yourself how many people you know who choose wrong, lie, get angry, seek revenge, quit when the going gets tough, or play nasty emotional games without feeling justified? I am going to talk about personal narratives not as a principle of the gospel but as a means of seeing how gospel principles apply in the inner recesses of our minds.

The Savior's parables give us a glimpse of the power of our narratives. Matthew states of Christ that on occasion "without a parable spake he not" (Matthew 13:34). When Jesus said that He taught in parables so that "seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand" (Luke 8:10), He knew how certain listeners would interpret His simple stories. To interpret a story is often to position ourselves in relation to it. Jesus' listeners did that, and so do we. We do this with stories we hear, and we do this with our own experiences. Think of the parables in relation to judgments we make: When we judge someone who has offended us or is in our debt, do we remember that we have received far more mercy than we want to extend? Do we receive God's love and life's bounty as a prodigal son who snatches it and runs or as the faithful son who begrudges the ring and robe given to the brother who returns after being beaten by life? And do we recognize the love in that father who ran to meet his wayward son? What kind of neighbor are we on our way up to Jerusalem to fulfill our priestly duties?

Christ's parables can trap us into seeing truths about ourselves we might not want to see. Our personal narratives—the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and why we

act the way we do—can trap us in a different way. If we're not careful, they can keep us from seeing the truth.

We all, to some degree, have circumstances we can control and many we can't. We mold our character and our view of life around the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and how these circumstances affect us. Some of the things that are largely beyond our control are the family we are born into, which includes the traits of our parents and siblings; our gender; our body and stature; the place we are born and where we grow up (and by the way, it has been said that geography is destiny, especially on a world scale); the schools we attend and most of the teachers we have; and what people around us think and do. And there are many in-between areas in which some people have learned to shape and influence attributes that seem to others to be beyond control: Are we dumb or highly intelligent, shy or socially comfortable? Are we the one who doesn't fit in, while all those around us seem to belong? How do we help create the family we are born into? Do we really need other people around us who seem to know exactly what we are feeling and who respond according to *our* needs? Or do we whine when what we seem to get is a Nephi who grabs us and tells us how it's going to be? Are we jealous of those who seem to get more attention or love than we do? Do we watch others receive blessings that we pray for, while we wait, our prayers seemingly unanswered? In almost all these areas we actually have the ability to choose what we will experience and the direction we will go. To quote President Samuelson in a recent devotional talk, "You are really and quite completely in control of those things of ultimate importance" (Cecil O. Samuelson, "Your Future," BYU devotional, 8 September 2009).

Please understand that I don't in any way deny that individual people, groups, families, and whole nations have been cruelly victimized. Nor do I wish to minimize their suffering.

Nor do I deny that sometimes we must do all we can to change our circumstances. Rather, I focus on things we can't change and those we can only change a little by how we interpret them. There is a huge difference in the way people respond to difficult situations, as we will now see by turning to different generations of Zoramites.

We know that Zoram married a daughter of Ishmael and that his descendants usually aligned themselves with the Nephites. Lehi blessed Zoram for being forever a true friend of Nephi. I like that. Zoram and Nephi became true friends. Lehi promised Zoram that his descendants would dwell in prosperity along with Nephi's and that nothing would harm them or disturb their thriving but their own iniquity (see 2 Nephi 1:30–32). We might ask how iniquity would enter among the Zoramites. Well, in addition to the temptations and choices every generation faces, they also had the old story that could be told in different ways.

For many generations the Zoramites seem to have told the right story. For about five hundred years after Lehi left Jerusalem we don't hear of the Zoramites—which is a good sign. They had blended and intermarried with the Nephites and migrated with them three times. Then things start to happen. The next Zoram we meet, in Alma 16, is the general who defeats the Lamanite army that destroyed the city of Ammonihah, a general who sought counsel from Alma and who named one of his own sons Lehi. Also among the descendants of Zoram are the traitors Amalickiah, who rebelled against Helaman and joined the Lamanites and then murdered and seduced his way to the Lamanite throne, and his brother Ammoron, who commanded the armies that fought General Moroni and made things far worse for the Nephites (see Alma 52–54). It's so much easier to betray your friends when you feel, "I never did really belong; I always felt different." We next meet the Zoramites when

they lead astray the children of Lamanite converts in 3 Nephi 1:29. We can just picture this generation saying to the converts, “Hey, we’ve lived with the Nephites, so let us tell you a few things.” In 4 Nephi, Zoramites are counted among the faithful Nephites when other peoples have apostatized generations after Christ’s visit. As we can see, the Zoramites were torn from time to time between faithfulness and rebellion, and I suspect that their family narratives had a lot to do with their conduct.

At least we see this troubled narrative of the Zoramites in the middle chapters of Alma. One of the first things we learn about Zoramites in this generation is that they trampled Korihor to death (see Alma 30:59). What do we make of that? Then in Alma, chapters 30 and 31, we learn of a Zoram who led a group of dissenters (the same ones who trampled Korihor?) away from the Nephite communities and set up their own form of public worship. Listen to their prayer as written in Alma 31, keeping in mind what I’ve said about their tough choice of narrative:

*Holy God, we believe that thou hast separated us from our brethren; and we do not believe in the tradition of our brethren, which was handed down to them by the childishness of their fathers; but we believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children; and also thou hast made it known unto us that there shall be no Christ.*

*But thou art the same yesterday, today, and forever; and thou hast elected us that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell; for the which holiness, O God, we thank thee. . . .*

*And again we thank thee, O God, that we are a chosen and a holy people. Amen. [Alma 31:16–18]*

Wouldn’t you know it? The Zoramites of all people are the ones who pray openly about how chosen they are, while those around them are destined to feel God’s wrath and be damned! It’s as if the burden of interpretation,

the press of how to square their growing feelings of separateness with their place among the Nephites and believers, led this Zoramite generation not to humility, gratitude, and obedience but to a twisted view of themselves. Once there, they also twisted God’s doctrine to accommodate their feelings. There is a parable in that. The Zoramites made their need for separation into a matter of divine will, and in their hands the doctrines of holiness and election have become narrowly elitist and—note this—divorced from compliance. The Zoramites are chosen not because they have chosen obedience but because God likes them so much and expects merely that they acknowledge His favoritism—once a week.

The Zoramite experience should make us stop and ask how God figures in our own personal narratives. It’s wonderful to feel chosen and special, but the story warns us against certain kinds of feeling chosen. When we feel selected and favored to a degree that we neglect obedience, humility, effort, hard work, unity, and preparation, thinking that no matter what we do, God will make things turn out well, we make God an accomplice of our foolishness. Does our God really play favorites? Or does He offer every person the same opportunity to grow and feel even more of His love if they exercise faith and keep the commandments?

To make the ironies more interesting, the Zoramites have also excluded the poor who helped build their synagogue. We don’t know whether these poor, rejected ones are other Zoramites or Nephites who lived in the area before the Zoramites moved in, but I like to think that it’s actually the latter. If I’m right, the Zoramites have now turned the tables on the descendants of Lehi, but instead of telling them, “Be free like unto us,” they tell them, “You’re different. Stay away. And by the way, you’ll never be like us no matter how hard you try because God likes us better.”

These poor rejects give Alma a golden opportunity to win them over if he'll just sympathize with them and denounce the injustice. Imagine how an unwise Alma could have responded. He could have called in a platoon of soldiers to restore order or mobilized a demonstration of poor outcasts. At the very least he might have validated their feelings. Just think of the long-term consequences of any of those actions. Think of how it would influence their personal narratives. Instead, Alma tells them, "It is well that ye are cast out" (Alma 32:12). Then he uses the occasion to offer them the one thing that would fundamentally change the way they saw themselves and their situation.

No, it's not a lesson on self-esteem. It's far more profound and truthful than that concept. He teaches them about faith. In a sense, he tells them, "If you want to change your situation, your story, yourself, shift your attention away from where it is now, and believe. Plant the seed of faith. You'll notice two things if you do."

Listen to what he says of the seed of faith:

*Behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—It must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good, for it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me. [Alma 32:28]*

This experience further increases faith, which further blesses the believer. In verse 34 Alma continues:

*Ye know that the word hath swelled your souls, and ye also know that it hath sprouted up, that your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand. [Alma 32:34]*

I see two effects of growing the seed of faith. First, we find the truth. Faith will sprout and be delicious to our souls, and if we nourish it,

it will further strengthen our belief in God, His Son, and His teachings. Second, it will change us. Is there anyone here who does not want an enlarged soul, an expanded mind, and an enlightened understanding? Alma promises that these come not from clinging to personal narratives that make us feel different or rejected or even elect, but from cultivating the seed of faith. To cultivate faith is to receive the healing influence of the Spirit. Alma makes reference to this healing power in the next chapter (see Alma 33:20–21). It's clear from Alma's message that we are to exercise faith. We are to do this in circumstances that seem to afflict us and that we cannot easily change. In those circumstances, *we* can be changed.

Alma teaches that as our faith grows it can lead to a perfect knowledge. That is so, but what interests me more in relation to changing ourselves is two additional points. First, although we can attain certain kinds of perfect knowledge, we need that feeling of growing faith, enlarged soul, and enlightened understanding many times. I doubt if we can ever be done with that. Second, I read into Alma's account the implication that faith can help us in ways we may not perceive or understand. In that sense our narratives become stories of faith of which we don't know the outcome any more than Zoram knew where Nephi was taking him. To nurture faith is to turn ourselves over to God and to experience His healing, even though we may not fully understand precisely what our problems are.

As taught by Alma, one of the great lessons of faith is that it can happen to you. Yes, you may feel vulnerable as you plant the seed, or in other words, as you believe in Christ and His gospel. But I see a promise there, that if you do plant it and nourish it, it will begin to be delicious to you. What greater evidence can we have that God loves us equally—all of us, including each of you sitting here in the auditorium or reading this talk?

This is also the message of the great discourse on faith in Hebrews. We often dwell on the definition given in the first verse of chapter 11, but I prefer the definition and promise implicit in verse 6: “But without faith it is impossible to please him [God]: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” God rewards anyone’s faith. Hebrews also confirms what many believers have felt, that faith in God brings to us a feeling of being “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (11:13). In connection with our personal narratives, we note that a certain kind of feeling different goes with the commitment to believe in God and His Son and follow their commandments. Listen as the passage continues, building on the sense of being “strangers and pilgrims”:

*For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.*

*And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.*

*But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city. [Hebrews 11:14–16]*

If we overlay this on the story of Zoram, we will see an application. Zoram had to leave a country and become a pilgrim in literal and figurative senses. In choosing an unknown destination and trusting in Nephi’s teachings, he pleased God, the same God who was, I dare say, ashamed of those of Zoram’s descendants who wanted a country of their own making

I would now like to tell you some dramatic stories from my own life, but my experiences tend to be subtle. And I think you’ll understand when you hear that the principles I’ve been talking about are often higher than my ability to master them. I have dozens of narratives I can bring to mind, depending on how difficult my challenges are. One of them goes,

“I am but one. I cannot blame everyone, but I can blame someone.” Seriously, one lesson I’ve learned is that however difficult some of my challenges have been, my troubles have been far worse when they’ve resulted from my own bad choices. Once I get past my impulse to blame someone else, I find I’m on the path to clarity (enlightened understanding) and healing, and I am more able to experience the change that comes by faith.

One of my great blessings is to live surrounded by people who have in difficult situations held fast to their faith and shown largeness of soul. I am referring to my wife, our parents, our children and their spouses, siblings, extended family, friends, and colleagues. I can tell you of my children, uprooted from one place amid difficult family circumstances and thrust into new schools, who drifted at first toward the easy crowd who seemed to accept them, until they recognized that that crowd was taking them places they didn’t want to go, and they had the courage to seek out new friends. That took an ability to see the end of a story from the middle and to change direction.

I can tell you of the time I first attended church in a new ward as an older single adult—that is, without family around me to help buffer me and to help me fit in. I felt so out of place, so alienated, so unnecessary. I almost felt that attending church was too much to ask. As I sat there, I was blessed with this thought and just enough courage to do it: Get up and bear your testimony. I did, beginning this way: “You’ll probably wonder who this man over here is, so let me tell you a little about myself.” That changed everything, because it changed how I placed myself in relation to the rest of the ward, who, after all, came to church that day not to make me feel conspicuous but to worship and go away greatly instructed. Perhaps my testimony touched someone that day, maybe not. I know it affected me.

I can tell you about setting goals and accepting assignments in spite of a gripping fear that I couldn't really succeed, and of directing my fears to just sit over there for a moment while I quietly went to work. When I looked back, fear had slipped out.

With sadness I can tell you about young people I know who seem to be telling themselves, in the words of a song, I "never fool myself that my dreams will come true. . . . Anyone can hurt me, and they do" (Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, "Another Suitcase in Another Hall," from the musical *Evita*, 1976). This kind of story can appeal to us because it makes us not really responsible for what happens in our lives. By direct contrast, I can tell you about a ward member who grew up in a home where she didn't feel safe and battled feelings of depression and worthlessness. When she received her patriarchal blessing, she asked herself, "Who is this person being talked about here? It isn't me." But over the years she has consulted that blessing to remind herself how Heavenly Father sees her. As her faith grew, she came to believe the promises in her blessing. Or I can talk about a recently released bishop who told his ward, "I'm just one of the weak things the Lord talks about, and any good I've done has been His doing."

As a literary critic, I can't help but pause a moment on the concept of story. It turns out that stories are among the most common, natural ways we have of making sense of things, yet stories prove to have something fairly arbitrary about them. A sense of story requires us to put starts and stops in our narrative. However, many experiences lack definite starting and ending points because our experience is a continuum that takes different shapes as we interpret it. Additionally, in order to be organized and coherent, stories need focalization; they need to be about someone or from someone's point of view. Yet we know that almost all stories have other people and other points of view within them. Some writers have

made a name telling old stories from new points of view—perhaps from those of minor characters. We can learn at least two things from these facts. First, we actually can have a measure of control over our stories, and second, we have a lot to learn from other people's narratives, which matter to them just as much as ours do to us. Literature is partly about competing narratives, and anyone who adopts a story as their paradigm for reality probably needs to read a lot more.

Because every situation we are in will offer us different versions of itself, we need to pay special attention to the story God seems to keep telling us about who we are. It's a two-fold story, at least, and it may seem contradictory, but the contradiction contains more truth than either part separately.

One story God keeps conveying to us about ourselves is highly positive and assuring:

- You are my son or daughter already. I love you, I know you, and I will help you to become my heir.
- The power is within you to do much good, and you should not need to be commanded in all things (D&C 58:26–28).
- Every soul, including yours, is precious in the sight of God (D&C 18:10, 15). In fact, you are the purpose behind the immense and beautiful creation in which you live. Nothing in it surpasses you in importance or majesty.
- If you have desires to serve God, ye are called to the work (D&C 4:3).

On the other hand, the Lord keeps telling us:

- We are less than the dust of the earth (Helaman 12:7).
- Man is nothing (Mosiah 4:5, 11; Moses 1:10). In fact, "how great is the nothingness of the children of men" (Helaman 12:7).
- We are unworthy. "Acknowledge your unworthiness before God at all times" (Alma 38:14).

- We need to repent, right now.
- Those called of God in this dispensation are among the weak things of the earth (D&C 1:19).
- Left to our natural impulses, we are enemies to God (Mosiah 3:19).
- Our wisdom is foolishness before Him (2 Nephi 9:28).
- Wisdom equals keeping the commandments (Alma 37:35).

In the space between the two stories that God tells us about ourselves, our faith can operate in relation to *both* messages, a greater freedom is born, and opportunities can be seen more perceptively. In the tension we experience between the two tales, we recognize that there are many things beyond our control. We recognize that we are not wholly of our own making, but that our character—our souls—are in our own keeping; that the power is within us to do much good, but that we can do little of lasting spiritual worth on our own; that if we make the one crucial choice that leads to all others, if we choose to submit to God and

be patient, easily entreated, quick to do good, and willing to bear others' burdens, God can, through us, accomplish His purposes.

Among the heroes of the Book of Mormon from whom we learn, I suggest we consider Zoram. Perhaps there are people here who can relate to his story. He was, after all, needed on that expedition. Although he had to endure a little rough handling, the trap he was caught in was the very situation through which God had determined to bless him. Though he had to give up his homeland, God was preparing a better one. His choice of how to interpret the events that happened to him would not only influence what he would become—a true friend of Nephi forever—but would influence his children and many generations to come.

I bear testimony that faith in Jesus Christ has the power to help us get our stories straight, and I pray that, like Zoram, we will see that our life's circumstances are often the very conditions in which God has chosen to bless us as He helps us work out our lives, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.