Transcript

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The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets

Summary:

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The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets

Noel B. Reynolds

I am glad to welcome each of you here today. What we are going to be talking about is the gospel of Jesus Christ as taught by the Nephite prophets. So what that means is that we will be looking specifically at the Book of Mormon, and the teachings in which they define what the gospel is.

The Book of Mormon and other LDS scriptures define the term gospel quite precisely as the way, or means, by which an individual can come back to Christ. So, it is the means of returning to Christ. In these scriptures the gospel is the teaching that if people will (1) believe in Christ, and then (2) repent of their sins, and then (3) submit to baptism in water as a witness of their willingness to take the name of Christ upon them, and keep his commandments, he will (4) pour out his spirit upon them, forgive them for their sins, and that all who receive this baptism of fire, as it is called in the Book of Mormon, and then (5) endure to the end of their lives in faith, and in hope, and in charity will (6) be found guiltless at the last day and be saved in the kingdom of God.

Now I said all of that in one sentence. But it is a series of six items that add up to what the Book of Mormon presents as the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now that is just an introduction. I do want to tell you that what I am going to be presenting here has been published in BYU Studies in 1991, the Summer issue, Volume 31, so your can refer to that for details, for scripture references, and so forth, if you have further interest.

The Book of Mormon, we are told three times in the Doctrine and Covenants in the revelations given to Joseph Smith, contains the fulness of the gospel of Christ. You can look for example at Doctrine and Covenants 20:9 (you may want to look at that with me), and here we have the statement that Joseph Smith has been given “power from on high” (v. 8) to translate the Book of Mormon, which (v. 9) “contains a record of a fallen people, and the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and to the Jews also.” It goes on and says other important things about it, but, if you look at each of these three references that I have indicated for you here, you will see that they say similar kinds of things. (See Doctrine and Covenants 20:9, 27:5, and 42:12.) The Book of Mormon contains “the fulness of the gospel.”

Well, so what we are going to be asking today is, what is that gospel? Now, I want each of you to just think for a minute, what is the gospel? If someone had asked you before you came into this room how would you have defined the gospel? Just think about that for just a second. And then after we are done, I want you to compare what you now think the gospel is with what you had thought. And I think
that you will see that the Book of Mormon gives a more precise kind of definition than you might have expected.

I want to show you that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a phrase that occurs widely in the scriptures, but a phrase that means the same thing is “the doctrine of Jesus Christ.” Now, we might want to think those are two different things, but that is not the case. As is pointed out for example (and I will just race through some of these) in Jacob 7:6. And here you will find Jacob, who is the prophet who succeeded Nephi, being confronted by one of the great enemies of his church, being challenged and criticized for what he teaches the people, and it is said:

“And it came to pass that [this apostate] came unto me, and on this wise did he speak unto me, saying: Brother Jacob, I have sought much opportunity that I might speak unto you; for I have heard and also know that thou goest about much, preaching that which ye call the gospel, or the doctrine of Christ.” Jacob was using both terms for the same thing.

Now you will see from the examples we'll give as we go through this that that is the case. We have other references here in which Nephi, for example, in explaining that great vision that he had to his brothers afterwards, refers to this gospel of Christ. Then at the end of 2 Nephi, when Nephi is presenting to his posterity this book, he is finishing this writing—the small plates (his part of it)—he says that he is going to teach them some things about the gospel of Jesus Christ; and then as he starts out doing that (and let's now look at 2 Nephi 31:2), and he calls it the doctrine of Christ.

He says, “Wherefore, the things which I have written sufficeth me, save it be a few words which I must speak concerning the doctrine of Christ.” And so, we get Nephi then moving into the first of the Book of Mormon's systematic presentations or definitions of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, what does the word gospel mean? And what does the word teaching mean? And I have put on the screen here for you the Greek term didaskalia. That is translated “teaching.” And that is the word that occurs in your New Testament as doctrine. And when it talks about my doctrine, their doctrine, his doctrine, it is a teaching. Also, the word gospel is used in the New Testament to translate a term which means the good news. So the teaching of Christ or the good news about Christ, the good news of the atonement—that is what these two terms mean, but they are used to refer to the same thing. Does that make sense to you?

The next thing I want to show you is that the Book of Mormon offers us three complete statements of the gospel of Christ. And it identifies them as such. It is actually rather remarkable the way this occurs. Each of these three statements that you see here on the screen begins and ends with a statement that this is the gospel, or this is the doctrine of Christ. Isn't that interesting. [See 2 Nephi 31, 3 Nephi 9-15, and 3 Nephi 27:13-21.] It is hard to get mixed up about what is going on. These are
book-end statements, the beginning and the end. Those of you that have studied literature know that authors often do this kind of thing. They give you book-end statements to show that there is a unit, some literary unit there, that is important for you, the reader, to recognize. We have this three times in the Book of Mormon.

Now a further interesting thing about this is that as we look at each of these passages, they are actually given as quotations from Christ. So, as this is presented in the Book of Mormon, in these three systematic passages, it is actually presented as quotations from Jesus himself. Or in the first case we have here, 2 Nephi 31, Nephi is pulling together statements from the Father and the Son and presenting them to us to give us this definition of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let us just look at one of these so that you can see it. The one that we have just read (I am in 2 Nephi 31:2), where he says: First, I must speak a few words concerning the doctrine of Christ. Now, if we go to the end of that chapter, just nineteen verses later, he says, “And now, my beloved brethren, this is the way; and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved.”

“And now, behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God, without end. Amen.” He is trying to tell you something, isn’t he? He has said something that he thinks is very important at that point. We will go back in a minute and look and see what that was that he said to us.

And what that doctrine of Christ contains turns out to be a formula. It doesn’t use the word formula, but I will talk about that in just a moment. But, let’s first look at the contents of that formula. And as you start to look down this list that I have you’ll see that looks pretty familiar. No surprises today!

1. Faith in Jesus Christ
2. Repentence
3. Baptism of Water
4. Baptism of Fire and the Holy Ghost
5. Endure to the End
6. Receive Eternal Life

The gospel of Jesus Christ is based on the idea of faith in Jesus Christ. That is why it is named after him: belief or faith, in Jesus Christ. The second requirement is repentance. Then, if you believe in Christ, and that what he says is true, what is the next step? Can you live just any old way and be saved? No, you have to do what he tells you.

And he stands for a very high standard. It is a standard of sinlessness. And that is a big problem, isn’t it? That is a big problem for everybody. If you believe in Christ, then what do you do about your sins? You can deny them; a lot of people try that. But if you admit them to yourself, you realize you need to do something. And
what does he tell you to do? Repent of them. Give them up.

And what goes with the repentance? How do you demonstrate to Jesus and to the Father that you have repented and that you are determined to follow his commandments and not to sin any more? You ask for baptism. And baptism is something you do. You say to the person in authority, “I want to be baptized.” And if you qualify they will allow you to be baptized. So, it is an act of yours to be baptized.

Now the next step is, what does God do for those that are baptized, who have truly repented? He blesses them in return with a second baptism. He baptizes them back—with the Holy Ghost. It is called the baptism of fire, or the Holy Spirit, as Nephi explains it. And is that it? Lots of Christians today teach you that if you have had this experience with the spirit of God, you have it made. You are saved.

What does Nephi say? It is not quite over. In fact, you have to endure all the way to the end of your life, in these covenants that you have made. And we will see that he elaborates that. He explains to us that enduring to the end is a process that involves faith. Faith isn’t just a starting point, faith is for all of your life. And hope: once you have received the spirit in your life you then have reason to hope that maybe God will accept you. He has accepted you once, forgiven you of your sins—maybe he will accept you at the end. So you hope.

And finally charity—because, now that you have overcome your sins and have felt the love of God in your life, you can love other people in a way that you never have before, because you are not caught up in your problems, your identity, your sins, trying to justify yourself. That is past. You are justified because Christ accepts you, because the Father accepts you. You are free to love other people in the same way that he does, and he blesses you with that. And that charity is called the pure love of Christ, as it comes through this process.

Well, what is the gift that comes to those who receive all of this? What is the greatest of all the gifts of God? Eternal life or salvation, as it is referred to mostly in the Book of Mormon. They will be saved. Nephi uses both phrases. We sometimes want to distinguish those phrases, but the Book of Mormon doesn’t make a distinction. They are just used the same way.

Why would this be presented to us as a formula? Do you think about that? Is it just a mechanical process that we can just bang, bang, bang, bang, you do this and there you are, you get eternal life? Is it like a checklist of things you can work out? You know, like how to get an A in the class? You know sometimes your teacher will present you with, “If you want to get an A in this class, here are the requirements; you do them all you get an A.”

*Student comment:* Sometimes when you have formulas or steps to follow they become like goals, and we know what we need to do in order to return, or to live the
gospel; we know how to follow.

I think that is exactly the point. It is educational. In other words a formula makes it easier for us to understand, to think about it. It is a pedagogical or explanatory device. But it is not mechanical. The formula doesn’t save you. Knowing the formula doesn’t save you. Where do you get the knowledge that you will need to endure to the end and be saved? The scriptures are a great source of that knowledge.

What does Nephi say will tell you all things which ye should do? The Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost, he says, in the very next chapter, after he has finished this discourse, and we will come across this, will tell you things what ye should do in this process of enduring to the end. And so it is the spirit that will lead us to salvation, not the formula. But the formula is a help, it is a way of explaining to us the process by which we can come back to our Father in Heaven. So it is a teaching device.

And Joseph Smith was the first to seize on it. In the history of the Church he gave us what he called the first principles and ordinances of the gospel. Well, that is a kind of a summary of this little formula, isn’t it? You memorize those, one of the articles of faith, you understand what that is.

Finally, I want to make one other distinction before we go back to Nephi. Is the gospel the same as the plan of salvation? Now, think of these five little points. What are the main elements of the plan of salvation? The pre-existence, creation, fall, atonement, judgment. Do you see that the gospel is a part of the plan of salvation. It is a message that makes it possible for us to take full advantage of the plan of salvation. But the two terms are different things, aren’t they. Each term has its own meaning, so we don’t want to get that mixed up. Any question or comment about that?

Student: When we think of the fulness of the gospel we can think of it as not receiving everything that we are going to receive eventually; not everything is in the Book of Mormon (like endowment or celestial marriage), but yet there is everything that we need to put ourselves on the straight and narrow path.

Yes, thank you. So, I think we are ready to go back and start going through 2 Nephi. If you want to do that with me we will turn to chapter 31 and see how Nephi does this. I don’t even know how recently you have read 2 Nephi; let’s just look at a little bit of this together and then we will start to analyze it.

But this is the chapter in which Nephi recounts his experience of seeing the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist. Now how does Nephi see that? Nephi lives over 500 years before John the Baptist, and he’s a continent and an ocean or two continents and an ocean away. Yes, it is a vision, isn’t it? And we know that Nephi had such a vision because he tells us about it in 1 Nephi 11. Any other sources?
Who else saw the vision of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus? Lehi. In fact, Nephi had just asked the Lord to see the vision his father had seen. And they both speak of this. And, if you look (and I won’t take time to demonstrate this to you right now) but if you look carefully at Lehi’s report of that vision, and then Nephi’s report of that vision, back in 1 Nephi, I think you will see that 2 Nephi 31 isn’t a new vision; it is Nephi giving a more detailed description of what he saw and heard the first time. And some of the same language and phrases pop up as Nephi does that. But I will leave that for you to do on your own.

Nephi chooses to emphasize this concept that he hears the Father say to him when he sees the baptism of Jesus in his vision, and that is, that all men should follow him. Christ says that they should “follow me.” And Nephi concludes we should follow him (Christ). In other words, we should follow his example. And what is his example? What did he do? Well, Nephi explains it to us as if Jesus is going through these six steps. Now, that is a little strange because Jesus didn’t have sins, did he. But Nephi does it that way and let’s look at this and see how he handles it.

First of all, I want to point out to you Nephi presents our little formula five times in these nineteen verses. So it isn’t just once; he presents it first, then he does it again, then he does it again and again and again! And each time he does it he twists, he puts a little different angle on it, a little different spin, adds a little detail here, doesn’t repeat something he said before. So each one is a little different. But, when we add them up we get a comprehensive portrayal of what the gospel of Jesus Christ is. Let’s try that by looking through it.

Starting in verse 4 he says, remember I’ve told you about the prophet that would baptize the Lamb of God? And so he tells us where he is going to start, what his reference point is. He says, “Now, if the Lamb of God, being holy, should have need to be baptized by water, to fulfill all righteousness, . . . how much more need we, being unholy, to be baptized, yea, even by water”!

So where does he start in our formula? He is starting with baptism, isn’t he. He is kind of starting in the middle.

“And now, I would ask you, . . . wherein the Lamb of God did fulfill all righteousness in being baptized?

“Know ye not that he was holy? But notwithstanding he being holy,” he showed us that according to the flesh he humbled himself before the Father. Now, what is that in our formula? It is repentance. Now does Jesus repent? No, not having sinned. But even not being sinful he humbles himself in the attitude of a repentant person. So, we should be humble even if we haven’t sinned, but certainly being sinful, there is a warning for us to be humble; and then Christ witnesses to the Father (still in verse 7) that he would be obedient to him in keeping his commandments. How did he do that? Through the baptism—that is the baptism.
“Wherefore, after he was baptized” with the water, what happens? “The Holy Ghost descended upon him in the form of a dove.

“And again, it showeth unto the children of men the straitness of the path, and the narrowness of the gate, by which they should enter, he having set the example before them.”

So, what has Jesus showed us by his example? These principles are a path, aren’t they, that will take us back. And how do we get in? There is a narrow gate. What is the gate? Repentance and baptism. (We are picking this up well; Nephi is going to like us. You watch when he reviews this in a minute he will say you’ve already got it, but for everybody else, he explains it again.)

And so in verse 11 here we have: “And the Father said: Repent ye, repent ye, and be baptized.” This is the second time around, isn’t it? We are getting a little repetition here. “And also, the voice of the Son.” Who are these authorities? Can you get any better than this? See, these are the voices Nephi heard in his vision, or that his father heard in his vision.

“And also, the voice of the Son came unto me, saying: He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost, like unto me.” So if he did it, he’d do it for you the way he did it for me. “Wherefore, follow me!” This is Nephi’s point. Nephi is seeing the example being issued here. “And do the things which ye have seen me do.”

And, so what does Nephi do? Okay, his fingers are in it twice. And Nephi says in verse 13, (and now Nephi gives us his own summary), “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I know.” How does he know? He saw Jesus doing it in vision and he heard the voice of the Father and the Son both saying it, twice. “Wherefore, my beloved brethren . . . [speaking to his own people and to his descendants as he is writing this], I know that if ye shall follow the Son, [again the example of following] with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception [What is this getting back to? Sincere repentance, right] but with real intent, repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ, by baptism—[How do we witness? by baptism: baptism is our witness to him.], yea, by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water, according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost; yea, then cometh the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost; and then [What happens after you have received that baptism?] then can ye speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel.”

At that point you can speak in this way, but then and now he goes back in and starts quoting again and gives us the third (pardon me it is the fourth, isn’t it), the fourth repetition, starting in verse 14:

“But, behold, my beloved brethren, thus came the voice of the Son unto me, saying: After ye have repented of your sins, and witnessed unto the Father that ye
are willing to keep my commandments, by the baptism of water, and have received the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost, ... “(click, click, click, then what?) and can speak with the new tongue of angels, and all this, if you deny me, “it would have been better for you that ye had not known me.” So, the gospel is good news and bad news!

“And I heard a voice from the Father, saying: Yea, the words of my Beloved are true and faithful. He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved” (v. 15). He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved. And so after you have received the Holy Ghost, can speak with the tongue of angels, and all these things, is it over? Then the Father speaks and re-affirms the necessity of all that, and says, he that endures to the end, the same shall be saved.

Well, Nephi says, now, my beloved brethren, by this means, I know. And so now Nephi gives us his summary in this last five verses; and this is the fifth presentation in these nineteen verses.

“By this,” Nephi says, “I know that unless a man shall endure to the end, in following the example of the Son of the living God, he cannot be saved.” So the first principles and ordinances of the gospel are following the example and then enduring to the end and being saved.

“Wherefore,” Nephi says, “do the things which I have told you I have seen that your Lord and your Redeemer should do; for, for this cause have they been shown unto me, that ye might know the gate by which ye should enter. For [now you folks already know this, but Nephi is repeating it just in case somebody missed it] the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water; and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost.”

What brings the remission of sins? Not the baptism by water. Are you confused about that? You know when eight year olds are baptized and see the water, very often they are told that it is the water that brings the remission of sins; but the remission of sins is the gift of God that comes afterwards. We show our covenant, we witness to the Father that we will do these things—that is baptism; it is our faith, we are the ones that go into the water. He chooses whether or not to forgive our sins, right? Everybody gets washed in the water. The truly repentant are forgiven. And the witness of that is the Holy Ghost that comes to them. This is the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost. And then cometh the remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost. It is not the washing metaphor, it is the burning/cleansing metaphor, isn’t it, the cleansing by fire.

And then are ye in the straight and narrow path which leads to eternal life? You are there at the gate, you have done according to the commandments of the Father, you have received the Holy Ghost, (he is summarizing it all again), which witnesses of the Father and the Son unto the fulfilling of the promise. So the Holy Ghost, when it comes to you, witnesses that the promise has been fulfilled. What promise? If you would repent and do these things ye would receive the spirit and
the remission of sins. So this is the fulfillment of the promise, fulfilling the promise which He hath made, that if ye entered in by the way (what does that mean—repent and be baptized) ye would receive what—the spirit, the remission of sins.

"And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path [What is missing? What about faith? We really think faith is important don't we? Well, doesn't Nephi? Has he mentioned it? I mean it sounds like he has faith, doesn't he? And after all, what is he talking about? But he hasn't mentioned it has he? Well, let's keep going.]. . .

"After ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? [What do we see coming up? Endure to the end, right? He is all done, we would ask if all is done?] Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him."

So how did you get to this point? Repentance, baptism, gift of the Holy Ghost? By faith. That is how you got here. So, note now we don't have to worry, do we; we can relax. Nephi got it right! "Unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save."

"Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ." What does that mean? What part of our formula does steadfastness in Christ refer to? Faith—steadfastness in Christ is faith, isn't it. Watch how the rest of it comes and you will see why it is faith.

"Steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men." Charity! Faith, hope, and charity is the means by which we do what? Endure to the end! "Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life."

See how Nephi just weaves it very tightly around this little formula. In the process of repeating it so many times he helps us understand, in more detail, how each of these principles of the gospel works.

Now, we've taken a long time, in this discussion, to go through 2 Nephi 31. What I want to show you is that if we turn over now to 3 Nephi (and we will start in chapter 9 but not take the time to go through it in this kind of detail), you will see that the same kind of thing happens again. Is there any question on any of that?

Student comment: I just wanted to make a comment that it is amazing how many times he repeats it, yet we still fail to follow it.

It is going to get repeated some more here. In fact, I want to end by showing you just how often this really is taught, and how we can see that the Book of
Mormon really does contain the fulness of the gospel, and why President Benson, and the Doctrine and Covenants, and others encourage us so much to read the Book of Mormon carefully.

What I really want to show you is chapter 11 of 3 Nephi, starting in verse 31. Now chapter 9 does present the gospel and you get four little presentations of it. That is when Christ first speaks to the Nephites and he tells them to repent and be baptized and receive the Holy Ghost. But now, in chapter 11, he has appeared to them; he is speaking to them and he says:

“Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, I will declare unto you my doctrine.” Here we see it coming, don’t we? Just like Nephi did.

“And this is my doctrine [again] and it is the doctrine which the Father hath given unto me.” It has got to be really sleepy scripture reading time if you don’t get the point of what you are going to get here. “And I bear record of the Father, and the Father beareth record of me,” and so forth. “And whoso believeth in me, and is baptized, the same shall be saved; and they are they who shall inherit the kingdom of God. And whoso believeth not in me, and is not baptized, shall be damned” (33-34). There is the good news, bad news again.

“And [v.35] verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and I bear record of it . . . and whoso believeth in me believeth in the Father,” and so forth. Well, we don’t want to take the time to go through all of this in detail, but we will see that in this presentation, again, Jesus presents faith, repentance, baptism, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end several times. We actually have to wait until chapter 15 to get enduring to the end attached to it. But it is implicit throughout, and this is repeated up through the beginning of chapter 12.

Then, finally, we have the appearance of Jesus to his disciples later on. We don’t know how much later this is; it could be weeks, it could be years, but the disciples are travelling somewhere, it would appear. And they are disputing what the name of the Church should be. And what is the answer that Jesus gives to them? He says, why are you confused about this? Whose gospel is it? It is my gospel that you teach, therefore it should be in my name.

Look at 3 Nephi 27:13, for example. He says, “Behold I have given unto you my gospel, and this is the gospel which I have given unto you.” And then if you skip down to the end of this passage (v.21), “Verily, verily, I say unto you, this is my gospel; and ye know the things that ye must do in my church; . . . for which ye have seen me,” and so forth. And if you read through that it is exactly the same presentation again. “And he that endureth not unto the end the same is he that is also hewn down.” After explaining that they must repent and be baptized, they will be filled with the Holy Ghost, they must endure to the end and they will be saved. So, we are not left wondering what the gospel of Christ is, if we will read this and read it carefully.
Now I want to make one final point. In the Bible, for instance, the Old Testament, the New Testament, and in other ancient literatures, when you have a formula, as we do have here, where we have six elements in the formula, notice that you can get someone to think about that formula, have it come to their mind, just by mentioning certain parts of it. If you want to put this on your list of something new you have learned today, this is called merismus or a merism. A merism is a rhetorical device; it is a writing device, by which you can name your first and last element of a series (this is kind of mathematical), and that will bring to the mind of the person the entire series.

For example, “Believe . . . in me and be saved.” Now, we know that there are religions that take that literally; they think all you have to do is believe in Christ and be saved, right? But, once you realize that this is a standard technique, what does that make you think? Yes, believe and be saved are items, first and last. This is the A and the Z, right? And you’ve got to fill in between, and you know what it is.

I won’t belabor this, but I would just point out that in going through the Book of Mormon very quickly, and making a conservative count, I find 130 statements of the gospel of Christ that are meristic; that is, like this, where the formula is suggested by the presentation of two key terms, often the last term with one or more of the earlier terms. So, when you don’t see the formula splattered all over, on every page, you’ve got to remember that you are being spoken to by someone that thinks you can think and that mixing parts of it will bring the whole thing to mind, because all of the parts have been presented very systematically to you.

I hope that this helps the way that you will think about the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that you will understand why the Doctrine and Covenants emphasizes that the fulness of the gospel of Christ is presented in the Book of Mormon. I want to share with you my testimony that I know that this teaching of Christ is true, that this is the only way by which human beings can come back into the presence of their Father in Heaven, and I say it in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.