We have been studying the Book of Mormon, and I now find that the book I was raised to understand doesn't really exist as I thought it did. I hope to paint an accurate picture of what I thought the Book of Mormon was, and more of what I see it as now.

Past understandings

I'm in my late 60's now, and when I think back on my upbringing in the church what I see now is not what I saw back then. For example, as a child I was taught that the Book of Mormon was a historical record of a family of Jews the Lord led out of Jerusalem to a promised land. The book was all about their struggles for survival and their challenges because of the rebellion of their oldest sons. When we introduced people to the Book of Mormon it was as a history of the Nephites and Lamanites, the ancestors of the native American people.

Conference talks seemed to mostly center on food storage, financial responsibility, home and visiting teaching, and the paying of tithes. There were only twelve temples in the world when I was young, and most of them were in Utah, Idaho, and Arizona. Temple attendance wasn't a big topic.

It was after my mission that the church added "Another Testament of Christ" to the title of the Book of Mormon. At the time I thought "Interesting." But I didn't really think much more of it at the time. Jesus was not a word you heard often in church, except at Christmas and Easter. The Book of Mormon was all about the individual experiences of

the various prophets and how they dealt with the people of their generation. Jesus didn't really feel like he came into the picture until 3 Nephi when he made a brief visit to the surviving Nephites.

The change

It is difficult for me today to put into perspective how the church taught the doctrine of eternity back in the day. All of the doctrine was there as it is now, but the focus was in different places and on different things. Little by little the emphasis of the church began to change. We started to hear about Jesus more often. At first I was uncomfortable. When we sang the songs of Zion in Primary for instance, we didn't sing a lot about Jesus. We sang about a little stream that gave, about popcorn on an apricot tree, and about being glad when mommy or daddy came home. The only doctrinal children's song that readily came to mind universally was "I Am a Child of God". And that doesn't talk about Jesus at all.

Imagine my discomfort when we were asked to sing the new Primary hymn "I Will Walk With Jesus". The word Jesus is used 13 times in 3 verses. That is as much as I would have heard his name in 6 months as a child. (Okay, so that is probably an exaggeration, but hopefully you get my point.) I felt like I had entered an evangelical congregation. Over the course of just a few years the number of talks about Jesus and focusing on Jesus increased exponentially in the church. This was a change I had never anticipated would happen, and frankly I didn't know what to do with it.

Approaching the change

At first I felt like the church was going somewhere without me. I was being left behind, but as an active and devoted member I couldn't figure out why I felt so alienated by that which had always brought me so much comfort. I knew the church was true. My testimony and understanding of the latter-day work is that it will continue to evolve until it has molded a people ready to receive the Savior at his second coming. How that is supposed to take place or what is going to happen to us as a people is unknown to me. I just know it will happen.

Even as a missionary in the late 70's I was noting changes taking place in the church. The priesthood was extended to all worthy male members. Women were allowed to say prayers in sacrament meetings. Then the meetings were consolidated then shortened.

New technology was beginning to be used to record and broadcast meetings to people's homes. Temples were made smaller so we could build them faster and in more places. Now that temples were becoming more of a common place thing in people's lives no matter where you live on the planet, we started to hear more about temple attendance in Conferences. Today it is a major and universal theme by the prophet and the church leaders around the world.

In 2020 when COVID hit and everyone had to stay home, we were the only church in the world already prepared to worship from our houses instead of needing to be in a church building. Even today I struggle with having to have a phone instead of a manual or a set of scriptures in church. I feel sacrilegious not reading each week from a set of scriptures. From the looks of my Elders Quorum and Sunday School class I am probably alone in that feeling. The younger people are teaching the lessons and giving their talks from their phones. I still print out a written version in large print so I can read it and not get lost at the pulpit.

What happened

The current generation is so different from the one in which I was raised, and especially from that of my parents. With the advances of wickedness in the world and the celebrating of individual differences among people, all the stereotypes I was raised with have been tossed into the rubbish bin.

We are changing as a society and as church members. As the world has more fully embraced evil, so has the church more fully embraced spiritual and physical purity. The world is promoting violence in many forms, and the prophet is teaching Christlike love, patience, kindness, and forgiveness. We really are living in a pivotal time. Focusing on Christ has become a greater necessity than ever before just to survive the pull of the world around us.

What happened to the Book of Mormon

Turning my focus to rest squarely on Christ has been a slow and spotty process. I am so happy to have had this year to study the Book of Mormon. My perception of the Book of Mormon used to be about the ongoing battle between the Lamanites and the Nephites. Now it is about the position Christ holds in each person's heart, no matter which society we live in. Nephi may have been telling his story about how his family traveled

from Jerusalem to the new world, but his message is all about the importance of Christ being the bringer and provider of salvation to all of humanity. My focus is finally closer to where it is supposed to be, which is on Christ and his mission.

It was only in the last year that I realized the totality of Christ's sacrifice and payment for the sins of all mankind. I was frankly surprised (I don't know why) when I realized that Jesus paid for the sins of every man, woman, and accountable child who would ever live on earth and elsewhere. I know that Jesus having cleaned the slate between God and all of us as God's children puts us in a position of debt to Christ as the payor of our debt. We must answer to him for how we live our life and for the choices we make. We have to answer to him for any unrepented sins and misconduct in the last day. He truly is the one and only way available to us if we have any desire to return to live with our Father in Heaven once again.

I had always thought of faith in Christ as a masked way of saying that I needed to trust in God, my Father. And that is true, but I now realize that faith in God cannot save me if I try to leave Christ out of my salvation, for he is the only way I can achieve eternal life with my Father. I must have faith in Christ. I must look to him for my source of happiness in this life and for any happiness I desire in the eternities to come. All of these things are taught clearly and repeatedly throughout the Book of Mormon.

When they added "Another Testament of Jesus Christ" to the title of the Book of Mormon I thought it was nice, but didn't see the necessity of it. Now I see that considering the Book of Mormon as an essential testimony of the divinity and necessity of Christ in my life is absolutely needed. I no longer view the contents of the Book of Mormon as a historical record, but more as a record of how people's lives change when they turn to Christ and live by his laws. Christ is the center of everything that takes place within that book. His influence can be seen on every page and in everything that happens to his people, whether they are being obedient or rebellious.

One of my greatest lessons learned this year is that Jesus doesn't resent us for the sins we have or will commit. He willingly paid for them anyway, even if we wanted to be sinful on purpose. He is always willing to forgive when we choose to come to him and promise to live by his laws of happiness. All he wants is for us to be happy as he understands happiness. His mercy and grace are freely and always immediately given, never grudgingly or unwillingly, but always with eagerness and joy. He sees our

possibilities and always works to help us see what he can do to help us find the greatest amount of love and joy in our life. His love is unconditional and never ending.

This Christmas season I hope we can all feel overwhelmed with gratitude that our Savior came to suffer for us and die for us, that he was resurrected to bring all of us life eternal with glorified bodies, and he did it just because it serves the purposes of our Father in Heaven. He loves Him perfectly and will do anything in his power to glorify his Father. And that means that he needs to glorify as many of God's children as are willing to accept his sacrifice in their behalf. Christ's love for us is found all throughout the Book of Mormon. Look at the references given in the Come, Follow Me manual for 2024 and focus on the love Jesus has already demonstrated for each and every one of us.

Gratitude for Christ's sacrifices for me can only be acknowledged through my willingness to serve and sacrifice as much as I can to demonstrate my love for him. As he has done for the Father that which none of us could do for ourselves, all of us can do more to be like Jesus by serving each other. I hope this Christmas season is filled with our efforts to glorify our Savior through our service to each other. Merry Christmas.

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